**Administration & Finance Program Reviews**

**Sample External Reviewer Report 1**

**(Updated Spring 2017)**

**EXTERNAL REVIEW OF THE JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY**

**DEPARTMENT OF**

**November 12, 2020**

**Margie K, Reviewer**

**BACKGROUND:**

In preparation for an external review of the James Madison University Department of , the reviewer read and analyzed information 1) provided in the notebook prepared by the Department of for the Program Review Committee, 2) provided on the Department of Web site, and 3) solicited by the reviewer from the Director of . The reviewer made an on-site visit on November 12, 2003.

During that on-site visit, the reviewer met with the Team Leaders; the four Representatives; the Director and the Associate Vice President for .

**GOALS FOR THE EXTERNAL REVIEW:**

The reviewer established the following goals for the external review:

To make a general assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of the organizational structure and assignment of duties and responsibilities and to identify areas needing more in-depth study

To identify exposure to risk for the department and university with regard to organizational structure, assignment of duties and responsibilities, and general operational practices of the Department of

To evaluate the core values of the department to determine if they were those most appropriate for maximizing effectiveness

**FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**:

The findings and recommendations of the external reviewer are listed below.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Employee relations responsibilities should be designated to one individual who reports at the level of the current team leaders. Any compliance requirements, such as compliance with the American’s with Disabilities Act, should become the responsibility of this individual.

The team leader and the four representatives who report to him currently perform employee relations duties in addition to a variety of other duties that primarily relate to classification and compensation of classified employees. The director states that he becomes involved in the more difficult employee relations cases.

The employee relations function involves working with both employees and management to resolve conflicts and performance and conduct problems in the workplace, including potentially litigious issues. Successful performance in this function requires certain skills, knowledge, abilities, and judgement to effectively mediate and counsel the different parties. It also requires technical expertise to administer the relevant policies and procedures as well as a comprehensive knowledge of employment law. With the current assignment of these responsibilities, it would be difficult to maintain the desired consistency in handling issues and the assurance that staff members have the appropriate level of expertise to offer the university the desired protection.

Furthermore, designating this responsibility to an individual would allow for other employee programs to be brought under one area. This may enhance the proactive efforts to build employee morale and productivity through positive employee programming.

The department’s responsibilities in meeting the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act could also be performed by this individual. The job descriptions reflect that the workers compensation coordinator is involved in negotiating workplace accommodations between employees and supervisors as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. The director indicates that this individual does not perform those duties in isolation; however, that responsibility probably needs to be performed at a higher level in the department.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

The current processes for data entry need to be evaluated to determine if efficiencies can be gained by consolidating data-entry responsibilities.

Currently, most staff members perform some data entry. It may be more efficient for this effort to be consolidated. Consolidating these responsibilities should also enhance accuracy in terms of proper chronology of entries and the recall of previous transactions involving a particular individual. Furthermore, while it might be helpful for professional staff to understand the data- entry process, it would probably be more cost-effective for them to focus their time on their primary duties.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Before implementing organizational changes, the department should evaluate staffing and organizational structures at other larger higher education institutions in Virginia.

Implementation of recommendations for the reassignment of duties might result in organizational changes and/or changes in staffing levels. Also, one position (designated as a training position) has already been authorized. It would be advisable to look at other organizational structures in implementing these changes. This would provide an opportunity to learn from the experiences of other higher education institutions with regard to the rationale for their current organizational structure.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Develop a more formal process for responding to unemployment insurance claims that rise from non-routine separations.

Currently, the unemployment insurance forms are completed by the leave coordinators. The process for identifying any non-routine cases appears somewhat informal. It may be appropriate to determine a more formal process for identifying these cases because the responses can be significant if the individual who separated from university service were to bring any other action against the university. This responsibility could be performed in the proposed employee relations function.

**RECOMMENDATION**:

Some controls should be established to ensure that applications received for classified positions are screened with regard to equal opportunity principles and regulations.

Currently, all applications received for classified positions are forwarded to the hiring department for screening. The Department of does not audit any activities related to the screening until the end of the process. The Department should either assume the responsibility for screening the applications or build some controls into the process to ensure more accountability on the part of the hiring department. One suggestion would be to solicit and approve the screening criteria and list of interview questions prior to the department receiving the applications. Continuous training of department personnel would also be appropriate.

These changes are critical to protecting the department and university in responding to charges of pre-selection and discrimination in the employment process. Some of the time that is currently spent on recruitment activities that reap limited benefits might be redirected to provide some staff time to support this effort.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Consideration should be given to establishing a process to review the classification and starting pay of vacancies prior to advertising position vacancies.

Currently, positions are not reviewed prior to advertising to ensure that they are classified appropriately. Starting pay is reviewed only if there is a request for an above-minimum starting salary. It is advisable to make adjustments to the classifications of positions while they are vacant and to advertise them at the appropriate level rather than after an individual is hired. Different advertisements can result in different applicant pools and subsequent hiring decisions.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff members should expand the use of external resources to ensure accuracy.

Currently, the staff relies almost exclusively on their individual and collective interpretations of State and internal policy. To ensure that the interpretations of State policy are accurate, it is advisable to consult the appropriate officials in the pertinent state agencies. This is particularly relevant to this staff because most have limited experience working in the public sector and in Virginia State service.

There appears to have been some concern in the past about the reliability of information received from State agency staff. The reviewer’s experience is that the interpretations and information obtained from State agency officials are reliable and any questions about the reliability of information can generally be resolved through discussion. It is critical to the credibility of the department and individual staff members that they are consistent and correct in their interpretation of policy. Providing inaccurate information would leave the university and department vulnerable in actions against the university, would encourage employees and supervisors to by-pass the department when seeking information, and generally would create mistrust of all information provided by the department.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Emphasize credibility as a primary core value and goal. A method of communication should be developed to make maintaining credibility a focus of staff at all levels.

The department is making a significant effort to enhance its image. Gaining and maintaining credibility will be an absolute requirement in promoting a positive image and maximizing the effectiveness of working relationships with all university constituencies.

The term “credibility” is easy to define, understand, and to communicate. Credibility is personally desirable because it is synonymous with respect. All staff should be held strictly accountable in this effort.

**CLOSING COMMENTS:**

Overall, the Department of appears to be functioning well. There is a positive work environment and a strong camaraderie among staff. Working together, they have developed some very high-quality programs, such as the new employee orientation program.

The reviewer was most impressed with the open-mindedness of the director and staff to suggestions and their appreciation of the reviewer’s input about operations. The reviewer shared many of the enclosed recommendations and other comments on the day of the on-site visit. Everyone was enthusiastic about making improvements in their operations without any hint of defensiveness. The reviewer has no doubt that the results of the internal and external reviews will be taken seriously and used constructively for positive improvement.