

Crushed by Kindness

A Look at Akbar Marvasti's Pleas to USM Officials for a Better Work Environment

Just six months into his new job at USM, EFIB associate professor Akbar Marvasti sent the following e-mail to USM Human Resources Director Russ Willis:

From: Akbar Marvasti [mailto:Akbar.Marvasti@usm.edu]
Sent: Thursday, March 08, 2007 6:23 PM
To: Russ.Willis@usm.edu
Cc: george.carter@usm.edu; 'Farhang Niroomand'; 'Harold Doty'
Subject: Work Environment

Dear Mr. Willis,

Please find attached a collection of emails that I have recently received from coworkers. Over my first six months of employment, the environment in my department and college has not been particularly collegial, to put it mildly. During the past several weeks, I feel the environment is deteriorating further and the attached emails indicate to some extent the depth of the problems in this work environment. At this point, I am concerned about my welfare and feel the environment is having a detrimental effect on my work and possibly my health.

If the situation cannot be improved in my work unit, I would greatly appreciate the chance to discuss the situation with you or anyone else in human resources that you think appropriate. I am not writing this in order to harm anyone else's interest. I am simply concerned that my welfare is being diminished by having to work in a situation that is not of my own making.

Sincerely,

Akbar Marvasti
Associate Professor of Economics

In this e-mail, Marvasti complains to Willis that over his "first six months of employment [at USM]" the environment in the EFIB and the CoB has "not been particularly collegial, to put it mildly." According to Marvasti, things deteriorated so much during February and early March 2007 that he (Marvasti) had grown concerned about his "welfare . . . work and possibly [his] health." Marvasti closes by informing Willis that he (Marvasti) is concerned about having to work in a situation that is not of his own making.

Of course, as long time readers of USMNEWS.NET are aware, the CoB and USM were, by the date of Marvasti's e-mail to Willis, almost five years into the tumultuous Shelby Thames-Jay Grimes administration of USM. In January of 2003, that administration had fired almost two handfuls of deans during a reorganization of the University, and they did so without the courtesy of informing those deans beforehand about what was to occur. About one year later, that same administration fired two popular tenured professors -- Frank Glamser (Sociology) and Gary Stringer (English) -- for investigating, under the auspices of the USM Chapter of the AAUP, the reported academic credentials of Angeline Godwin Dvorak, USM's VP for Research.

Over the 2002-07 period there had been so many scandals at USM that at least a half-dozen websites were covering news and events from the institution. Coverage by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* only added to the national disrepute of USM. Thus, when Marvasti was interviewing for the job at USM during the Spring of 2006, he knew full well what he was getting into. For someone who had been in academia since 1985, there

were no excuses (or buyer's remorse) when it came to accepting a job offer from USM in the spring of 2006.

What else do we know about Marvasti? A number of reports and/or editorials here at USMNEWS.NET have included sources' statements that EFIB job search chair, Charles Sawyer (now at TCU), told various EFIB faculty that Marvasti had fled his tenured position at the University of Houston -- Downtown after his faculty "protector" was no longer around to [manage Marvasti's difficulties](#) with UH administration. Thus, Marvasti was no stranger to campus politics when he arrived at USM from a visiting position at Pomona College. Sawyer and EFIB chair George Carter have, in fact, made it standard practice for the EFIB to hire experienced faculty who were on the job market in order to escape one bad situation or another. Sami Dakhliya, another EFIB faculty hired during the spring of 2006, had been denied tenure from the University of Alabama before coming to USM. And, sources tell USMNEWS.NET that Sawyer reported to various EFIB faculty that Marvasti had been similarly denied by East Carolina University. (Marvasti lists his stint at ECU as "visiting".)

What do we know about Marvasti's treatment in the CoB since August of 2006? For one, the spring of 2007 was a "merit raise" season at USM. Marvasti's \$8,392 merit raise was not only the third largest spring 2007 merit raise in the CoB, it was also one of the biggest [merit raises awarded in CoB history](#). At more than 10%, Marvasti's merit raise was beyond generous, especially considering that all Marvasti has done on the research front since arriving in Hattiesburg is a single article in *The American Economist*, which sources report is a low-level outlet in economics. A search of the USMNEWS.NET archives also reveals that Marvasti's 2007 merit raise was about 9% larger than the largest merit raise ever received by former EFIB economist Franklin Mixon, whose research record easily dwarfs that of Marvasti, even though Marvasti has [been in academia](#) almost a decade longer than has Mixon. On top of that, Marvasti even stooped to using Sawyer as an [external reviewer](#) of his (Marvasti's) 2007-08 P&T dossier. With the recent approval of Marvasti's promotion to professor, his (Marvasti's) USM salary has increased by *more than 17%* in just the 20 months that Marvasti has been employed by USM.

Second, Marvasti spent each semester of the 2006-07 academic year on a two-course, one-prep teaching load. According to sources, this was probably the best teaching load in Marvasti's 23 years in higher education. In addition to this, USMNEWS.NET reported that Marvasti was named *QEP Fellow* by Carter in the fall of 2007, resulting in yet another two-course teaching load for Marvasti. Thus, after four semesters of teaching at USM, Marvasti's average teaching load is only 2.25 courses per semester.

Third, at the same time that Marvasti began working in the CoB, Carter and former CoB Dean Harold Doty brought Marvasti's academic mentor, Ray Canterbury out of retirement by hiring Canterbury as a Scholar-in-Residence. This decision ultimately

created all [sorts of turmoil](#) in the EFIB and the CoB. In addition to this episode, Marvasti was also a key figure in the CoB's [Black Tuesday](#) events, which occurred just days into Marvasti's tenure in the CoB. He also served a prominent role in the [hiring of Ms. Susan Doty](#), wife of former CoB dean Harold Doty, as the Director of the EFIB's Center for Economic Education.

Two things about Marvasti are made clear by this essay. One, Marvasti has been one of the most well-treated faculty in the CoB over the past two years. Two, if deterioration in the CoB's working environment has occurred, Marvasti has done more than his share in contributing to the slide. Both of these points are contrary to Marvasti's plea to Willis, which is inserted above. Indeed, Marvasti's behavior in this instance is bizarre, to put it mildly.

The ECO hiring class of 2005-06 is proving to be the most disastrous in the history of the organization.