MU professor seeks to sue over chair pick

By Janese Silvey

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A University of Missouri faculty member is considering legal action after her college dean tapped her to be a department chairwoman but withdrew the appointment when she tried to negotiate her compensation.

Associate Professor Loreen Olson has retained attorney George Smith and is seeking permission from the Missouri Human Rights Commission to file a discrimination lawsuit against Michael O’Brien, dean of the College of Arts and Science. She also is going through the formal grievance process on campus.

Olson was the only faculty member who sought the communication chair position after former chairman Michael Kramer announced he was leaving for a position at the University of Oklahoma. Faculty unanimously supported her because members “thought she would really serve us well going forward, in terms of helping us grow with prestige in research and getting more resources,” Assistant Professor Colin Hesse said.

O’Brien confirmed that appointment in a May 4 letter, saying Olson would serve a three-year term and outlining her salary. Olson accepted the post but questioned whether she should receive a stipend, some research money and extra pay for work she would assume before Kramer’s departure. O’Brien denied all but one of those requests, approving a one-time $5,000 allocation to be spent on either a research assistant or computer. When Olson replied with an explanation as to why she thought her requests were reasonable, O’Brien withdrew the appointment citing “irreconcilable differences.”

O’Brien would not discuss the situation because of personnel issues, but he did tell the Tribune that only a few chairs in the College of Arts and Science receive stipends. Kramer had received $2,000 when he was communication chairman; Clyde Ruffin in the theater department also receives a $2,000 stipend; and math chairman Glen Himmelberg receives $5,000 in travel funds, according to information obtained through a records request.

“When somebody negotiates and says, ‘I need x for whatever reason,’ I listen to what they have to say and make a decision,” O’Brien said. “Not every negotiation will end successfully.”

But Smith said Olson questions whether “irreconcilable differences” was a code phrase for ulterior motives. Because she had faculty support and O’Brien originally accepted that nomination, “the basic assumption is she is the most qualified individual,” Smith said.
Instead, O’Brien appointed Associate Professor Michael Porter to serve as chairman. In an e-mail announcing that appointment, O’Brien wrote: “This was a very easy call for me. Mike was literally the first person in Columbia whom I met thirty years ago when I moved here. ... I’ve always had great respect for him, in addition to considering him a close friend.”

The e-mail, Smith said, “doesn’t say he’s doing it because” Porter “is the most qualified. He says he’s doing it because ‘he’s my friend.’ ”

O’Brien said administrators cannot overlook qualified individuals who also are friends. Porter’s letter of appointment shows the same compensation package offered to Olson.

Smith said Olson wants to be reinstated as chairwoman through the grievance process. If she is not, she will consider pursuing the legal action.

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Mark Breier sees big benefits for his three sons in playing sports. But when his teenage son Travis, dreaming of a pro career, wanted to join an elite traveling basketball team in junior-high school, Mr. Breier said no.

Such teams "grab onto the holidays," with games scheduled on vacation weekends, cheating the family out of visits to grandparents, aunts and uncles, says Mr. Breier, of Los Altos Hills, Calif. Although Travis was disappointed, Mr. Breier told him, "our priorities are school first, and family time."

Youth sports have big benefits for kids. Research links participation to better grades and self esteem, long-term improvements in education and employment and lower obesity rates.

But the escalating time, travel and financial demands of many competitive youth teams are pushing some parents over the edge. Many are pushing back, dropping teams mid-season, barring year-round competition for their children or refusing to make their kids available for holiday or vacation-time play.

Organized team sports now start in preschool. Soccer, lacrosse, basketball and T-ball programs begin at age 4 or even 3. Playing "seasons" run year-round, pressuring pre-teens to specialize in a single sport. Children as young as 8 are being shuttled hundreds of miles to national basketball and football tournaments. Annual costs to parents for elite sports teams often extend well into four figures.

"Some parents are saying, 'This is crazy, spending all this money traveling all over creation. I want my kid to play sports, but I don't want it to consume their lives, and I am not willing as a parent'" to continue investing so much, says Dan Gould, director of Michigan State University's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports.

Noah Shriber's son, 9, was excited when he was selected earlier this year as one of 14 players among 400 who tried out for an elite ice-hockey team, says Mr. Shriber, of Newton, Mass. But one of the coach's first requests, to take part in a summer ice-hockey camp, conflicted with a family tradition—plans to send his son to a seven-week camp.

Mr. Shriber knew failing to enroll in summer skills camps could have consequences for players, such as reducing their playing time during the season. But he summoned his courage and told the coach his son couldn't attend. "My son loves hockey, but hockey is not his life," he told the
coach and offered to remove his son from the team to make room for a different player. To his surprise, however, the coach said, "That's fine." His son plans to return to the team after outdoor camp.

Many parents worry that youth teams choke out other interests. Mr. Breier says bypassing the travel basketball team made time for Travis to play a second sport, football, spend more time on academics and enjoy games with his dad and brothers in their back yard. Other families say dropping competitive teams has enabled their kids to take part in overseas service trips, debate and other clubs, or simply to get more sleep.

**Saving Time and Money**

Meg Searl and her husband Chris of Omaha, Neb., have ruled out elite travel teams for their four sons, saving both money and time for family dinners. This has enabled the Searl boys, 16, 14, 12 and 10, to start a summer lawn-mowing business. Ms. Searl's oldest son also has been able to hold a summer job.

Many parents choose laid-back community leagues instead. Ms. Searl says her sons have as much fun, or more, on neighborhood-league teams, as other kids seem to have on traveling teams. "They laugh, they tease each other, the coaches are laughing. They get there 10 minutes before the game and throw on a jersey," Ms. Searl says. "It's like the old-fashioned sandlot."

Of course, many families enjoy traveling with elite youth-sports teams and watching their children compete. They make family vacations out of the trips and enjoy socializing with other families on the teams.

I struggled with the issue of balance myself when my son and daughter played on traveling soccer and ice-hockey teams. Our family enjoyed the trips, my kids benefited from playing, and we gained some warm memories and friendships. After my son dropped traveling ice hockey, however, he realized with some regret that it had choked out exploration of other sports, such as football. And looking back, my kids, now 19 and 22, tell me I put too much emphasis on competition.

"Youth Sports Arms Race"

Some parents willingly join "the youth sports arms race" because they hope their children will earn college scholarships or pro careers, says Douglas Abrams, a University of Missouri law professor and a youth hockey coach for 42 years. In reality, these prospects are "infinitesimal," he says.

Only about 3% to 6% of high school basketball, football, baseball and soccer players make it to a college team, the National Collegiate Athletic Association says. Only about 2% of high-school athletes are awarded college athletic scholarships. Far more money is available for academic scholarships. And only about 1% to 9% of college athletes make it to the pros, the NCAA says.
Mr. Abrams advises parents to investigate coaches' expectations before signing up for a team. As a coach, he supports parents' setting limits and asks their input on decisions about travel.

Experts cite several warning signs that parents are over-emphasizing competitive sports. Jim Thompson, executive director of the Positive Coaching Alliance, Mountain View, Calif., recommends asking yourself, "Am I getting too excited when my child does well in sports? And am I getting too depressed when he or she doesn't do well?" If you never fulfilled your own dreams as an athlete, it is easy to project them onto your child. After growing up before Title IX, in an era when females had few opportunities to play sports, I was guilty of this.

The hazards for children who are pushed too far are well-documented. Many kids burn out or drop out before age 13. Overuse injuries abound. If your child is no longer having fun playing a sport, never practices independently, or feigns illness or injuries at game or practice times, it may be time to dial back.

For the family, some trouble signs are marital tension over the demands of sports teams; conflicts or jealousy between siblings over the time and parental attention allotted to sports; or parental resentment over the cost of sports to the family, in money and time.

Before each new sports season begins, consider setting up a family calendar and having a family meeting to discuss commitments, says Brooke de Lench, Concord, Mass., founder of MomsTeam.com, a website for sports parents. Make signing up a joint decision, weighing not only your child's interests, but the cost to the entire family in time, money, energy and missed opportunities of other kinds.

Youth sports pose a great opportunity to teach kids lessons about balance that will benefit them later. If a team's demands are "unhealthy, you've got to either change it or get out," Mr. Breier tells his sons, 18, 16 and 8. "What is the highest goal in playing sports? An appreciation of fitness all your life—and maybe you find a sport you can play all your life."

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