Chris Koukola, MU’s chief public affairs officer, set to retire

Banken to take on public affairs post.

By Ashley Jost

Wednesday, January 8, 2014 at 2:00 pm Comments (1)

After almost 28 years as chief public affairs officer at the University of Missouri, Chris Koukola is retiring.

Koukola, the assistant to the chancellor for university affairs, said she will miss the university and her co-workers but is looking forward to retirement, especially traveling, spending time with family and riding her horse.

"I'm looking forward to seeing more of Missouri from the back of my horse, without reading my email at the same time," Koukola said. She purchased her horse in April with retirement in mind.

The decision to retire has nothing to do with the university, Koukola said. She's 67 and has other things she wants to experience "without worrying what's in the next phone call or email."

Koukola's last day is Jan. 31.

"This job is extraordinarily time-consuming," she said. "It's been fine all of these years, but it's time to see what else I want to do in life."

During her tenure, Koukola said the biggest improvement she's seen the university make is putting the focus on the success of undergraduate students. When she arrived at MU, the emphasis was on research, and while that focus still exists, she said, the focus on undergraduates has significantly improved.

"I'm sure we always wanted them to succeed, but now we work hard for it," she said.
Mary Jo Banken, executive director of the MU News Bureau, will serve as interim assistant to the chancellor for university affairs beginning Feb. 1. Banken has worked at the university for 25 years. The university plans to conduct a national search for someone to fill Koukola's role full time.

Banken, who is on medical leave, said in an email that she is grateful to serve in the role.

"Chris Koukola leaves a legacy of outstanding leadership of the University Affairs Division staff as they have promoted MU during times of tremendous growth and success," Banken wrote.

No announcement has been made about who will fill Banken's role at the MU News Bureau.

Before she goes, Koukola and university affairs staff members are working to organize the university's 175th anniversary, including a ceremony in February and events throughout the year commemorating the occasion. Koukola jokes that her office ran the same celebration for the 150th anniversary, and she's not quite sure she's ready to see through the 175th, too.

A reception in Koukola's honor is planned for 3 to 5 p.m. Jan. 21 at Jesse Hall.

This article was published in the Wednesday, January 8, 2014 edition of the Columbia Daily Tribune with the headline "MU official set to retire Jan. 31: Banken to take on public affairs post."

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Posted in Education on Wednesday, January 8, 2014 2:00 pm.
No MU Mention

JEFFERSON CITY — Missouri lawmakers returned to the state Capitol on Wednesday, starting their 2014 session with little legislative heavy-lifting on opening day. The session runs through mid-May.

Here are five things to know about the Missouri legislative session:

1. FORMALITIES: After the House and Senate convened at noon, lawmakers spent the first day with formalities. House Speaker Tim Jones outlined his priorities for the session in a speech to fellow legislators. Senate President Pro Tem Tom Dempsey did not give a speech and began introduction of new legislation.

2. MONEY AND SCHOOLS: The Republican-led Legislature plans to try again at enacting an income-tax cut after the proposal last year was vetoed by Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon. Disagreement also has arisen about how much money is available for the state budget taking effect July 1. Legislative budget leaders have said they agreed to an estimate without Nixon and that the governor wanted a higher number. Nixon already has said his budget will include tens of millions of dollars focused on higher education. Dempsey has made addressing a student transfer law for unaccredited districts a key priority. About 2,000 students already have transferred from their home districts near St. Louis and more could follow suit in Kansas City. Jones wants to prohibit payment of union fees as a condition for employment.

3. THE CALENDAR: Legislative hearings are to begin next week, and the House has not scheduled a formal floor session until Tuesday. Nixon is to release his budget recommendations and deliver his State of the State speech on Jan. 21. The next
benchmark is a weeklong break in March that has marked the session's traditional halfway point. After spring break will come crunch time and deadlines: May 9 for passage of a state budget and May 16 to pass legislation.

4. PARTISAN IMBALANCES: Republicans hold overwhelming majorities in the Senate and House. But they no longer can count upon a veto-proof supermajority in the House because one GOP member left for Congress and a second resigned after he was appointed to the state parole board. House Republicans hold a 108-52 majority with three vacancies. The GOP controls the state Senate by a veto-proof 24-9 margin with one vacancy.

5. THE POLITICS: Many lawmakers will be able to kick off their next political campaigns during the legislative session. Candidacy filling runs Feb. 25 to March 25. One House Democrat is planning to skip re-election to run for state auditor. Legislative term limits mean others will be barred from remaining in their current chamber. Three senators and 10 House members cannot seek re-election to their current seats.
Belcher to retire from Columbia Public Schools, take MU job

By Catherine Martin

Wednesday, January 8, 2014 at 2:42 pm Comments (3)

Updated: 7:41 pm, Wed Jan 8, 2014.

**Columbia Public Schools Superintendent Chris Belcher has announced he will retire effective June 30 and take a job at the University of Missouri that will allow him to teach future school administrators.**

Belcher sent a letter to the Columbia Board of Education notifying members of his decision Wednesday afternoon.

“My five years of service to Columbia Public Schools has been the highlight of my many years in public education,” he said in the letter. “This decision was more emotional than I anticipated.”

Belcher has spent more than 30 years in public education, which makes him eligible to retire and receive the maximum benefits, Columbia Public Schools spokeswoman Michelle Baumstark said last month.

Belcher said Wednesday that when he came to Columbia Public Schools five years ago, he knew it would be his last public school system because of the way the retirement system works. He became eligible to retire two years ago, he said, but he planned to stay for another three years or so, when he hit the six-year point in the district.

"The university didn't care about my plans," he said.

Belcher said he saw a position advertised at the university that seemed like the perfect fit — an assistant professor of professional practice, which focuses on training superintendents and principals.
"When the job offer came it seemed like the best of both worlds," he said. "I could stay in Columbia and still have all my contacts, and I could train future superintendents."

Belcher will officially start the job at MU in August.

The school board will meet Monday and will vote whether to accept the letter of retirement and will begin talking about next steps, Baumstark said. The district doesn’t have an official timeframe set for selecting a new superintendent, but that will be part of the board’s discussion.

“We want it to be a very fluid process” and want to make sure “the board has the opportunity to interact with the candidates and the community has the opportunity to interact with candidates,” Baumstark said.

Ideally, a new leader would be selected a couple of months before Belcher’s June retirement, so Belcher would have some interaction with his successor. The fact that Belcher will still be in town, however, provides a “significant advantage” for the district, Baumstark said.

“He has spent more than 30 years in public education and five years in Columbia Public Schools. He’s accomplished quite a bit in his time as superintendent and with that comes a lot of background knowledge that will have to be transferred to the new individual,” she said.

Since the district last renewed Belcher's contract in April, he is making $198,992 a year.
Columbia Public Schools superintendent announces retirement

Wednesday, January 8, 2014 | 2:19 p.m. CST; updated 7:41 p.m. CST, Wednesday, January 8, 2014

BY FRED BROSCHART

*This story has been updated to include background about Chris Belcher.

COLUMBIA — Columbia Public Schools Superintendent Chris Belcher announced on Wednesday that he is retiring at the end of the 2013-14 school year.

**In a letter to the Board of Education, Belcher said he accepted a job at MU's College of Education.**

Belcher, 55, has been superintendent of Columbia Public Schools since June 2009. Before coming to Columbia, he was superintendent of Kearney R-1 School District outside Kansas City for four years.

He has been an educator for 32 years, according to his biography on the Columbia Public Schools website.

Belcher renewed his contract through 2015 in April. His salary for the 2013-14 school year is $198,922.

A contract does not preclude a person from retiring, said Michelle Baumstark, spokeswoman for the school district. When an employee can retire and the amount of pension he or she receives are dependent on years of service and the highest salary a person earned, Baumstark said.

"He has been eligible to retire for several years," Baumstark said of Belcher.

When he came to Columbia in 2009, Belcher said that addressing the achievement gap between students of different racial and socioeconomic status was the most important goal for the district, according to previous Missourian reporting. Even though the achievement gap remains a persistent problem in Columbia schools, the district is
performing well compared with others in the state and the nation, according to an August 2013 news release from Columbia Public Schools.

Since beginning his work as superintendent, Belcher has made various accomplishments in the district, including helping establish strong relationships with employees of the school district and the community and helping pass the $120 million bond issue to improve public school buildings.

Belcher has acquired many awards over the years, including the Missouri State Teachers Association Administrator of the Year, the Blue Springs Jaycees Outstanding Young Educator Award, and the Peters Memorial Graduate Student Scholarship Award.

In December, Belcher told the Columbia Daily Tribune he applied for the faculty position at MU’s College of Education and would consider retiring from the school district if he got the job.

Jonathan Sessions, a member of the Columbia school board, said he was saddened by the news that Belcher was leaving but felt confident that the Columbia Public Schools system would still benefit from Belcher's future work at MU’s College of Education.

"Columbia Public Schools will continue to receive the benefits of Dr. Belcher's knowledge, skills and experience through his leadership development position at the University of Missouri-Columbia," Sessions said.

In an emailed statement, Daniel Clay, dean of the College of Education at MU, said that in his position at MU, Belcher will work with school superintendents and principals around the state and will teach in the school’s educational leadership program.

"He is a highly respected visionary and leader in public education who has demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement," Clay said in the statement.

The statement also said Belcher would be a "strong asset to the college."

Sessions said he had no details about the search for Belcher's replacement.

Columbia's new schools superintendent should have all the same qualities Belcher has, Sessions said.

"He's honest, straightforward and able to communicate with our community," Sessions said, adding that Belcher was forward-thinking and able to devise long-term strategies and carry them though to completion.
"Dr. Belcher has been great for Columbia Public Schools," Sessions said. "He's a great leader and has done great things for the district."

The Columbia School Board will meet Monday, when it is expected to accept Belcher's retirement and begin discussing the search for a new superintendent, Baumstark said.
Student housing developer seeks infrastructure guarantee as plan proceeds

By Jacob Barker

Wednesday, January 8, 2014 at 2:00 pm Comments (10)

Despite warnings from city officials that infrastructure in the central city is inadequate for high-density development, another student housing project on the edge of the University of Missouri campus is moving forward.

American Campus Communities, a publicly traded real estate investment trust headquartered in Austin, Texas, is asking the city to rezone a little more than 3 acres on the western edge of the MU campus. The rezoning would accommodate an apartment complex — mostly made up of four-bedroom units — that could house as many 652 people.

With another 350-bed student housing complex planned along the south side of Conley Avenue, the area along Fourth Street between Turner Avenue and Stewart Road is set to be transformed from older rental properties into a high-density student living corridor.

American Campus Communities would buy 10 houses and two apartment buildings on Fourth as well as another house adjacent to the apartment buildings on Fifth Street. The site would house two structures to accommodate 170 units by 2016. Most of the properties are owned by Nakhle "Thomas" Asmar, the MU professor and landlord who bought the Niedermeyer apartments after Collegiate Housing Partners backed off plans to level the historic building for a high-rise apartment complex.

American Campus Communities, which also owns and operates more than 1,500 beds in Forest Village and Woodlake, Grindstone Canyon and The Cottages, would build two five-story buildings and include the parking structure in one of them. The project also could close Fourth to nonemergency vehicles, but the city and the developer are negotiating that point.
Some central city student housing complexes have raised the ire of neighbors for not including enough parking. American Campus Communities' proposal, though, includes a parking structure with 504 spaces.

It's "a huge step beyond what we've seen from any collegiate project thus far," said Pat Zenner, Columbia's development services manager.

Although parking has been an issue with similar projects in the past, the bigger issue now is infrastructure. City Manager Mike Matthes and Mayor Bob McDavid have said downtown's electric, water and sewer infrastructure is maxed out and cannot accommodate more high-density development. The concerns surfaced only recently, as a number of large projects began taking shape, including a possible 25-story building on the Bengal's Bar and Grill site a couple blocks to the north of Conley.

As city leaders revealed concerns about infrastructure, they also began a push for a central city tax increment financing district, which would capture the increased value of sales and real estate taxes in the area. They have proposed TIF before, but the push now comes as several large projects are poised to begin.

American Campus Communities' development agreement, currently being negotiated with the city, specifically says the city will serve the complex with basic utility services by 2015. That's an unusual contractual provision in a development agreement, but it's because of the lack of infrastructure in the area, said Robert Hollis, the attorney representing the company.

"All of those issues are being covered in the development agreement," Zenner said. The development can be served with utilities, "it's just a matter of the timing of service."

The question is how to pay for the infrastructure the city says it needs, and city administrators seem convinced TIF, because it doesn't raise taxes, is the most feasible option.

Hollis, who also represents the developers planning to build next to the American Campus Communities site as well as the group behind the 25-story high-rise proposal, said without TIF, the projects would die. Already, he said, the 25-story building has been delayed nearly a year. "I believe" TIF "is the only viable option right now," Hollis said.

The city's TIF proposal, while not finalized, likely would cover much of the central city, as far north as Business Loop 70, and be used for far more than a few downtown projects. But because TIF collects increases in value, those projects would give the city some certainty that the fund would get an instant "increment" of cash.

Hollis and city officials say finding other money for improvements within budgets is not feasible. If that's so, then the huge projects are linked to the political chances of getting the four votes necessary from the Columbia City Council for a TIF. And the developers seem optimistic; they're already spending on engineering and site plans.
"It's a tribute to Columbia," Hollis said. "We are in a rare situation of being a city that is really desirable right now."

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Posted in Local on Wednesday, January 8, 2014 2:00 pm.
Kindness Is Possible

January 9, 2014

BY
Colleen Flaherty

Word association game time.

First word: Academic.

Chances are, “kindness” wasn’t the first thing that came to mind. (Indeed, much has been said and written about the abundance of just the opposite in academe: pettiness, to put it nicely.) But a new blog aims to change that. The Academic Kindness Tumblr is a place for students and professors to post random and not-so-random acts of kindness they’ve witnessed during their studies or work, to remind themselves and others that colleges and universities may not be so inhospitable after all.

The Tumblr seeks “outtakes from peer reviews, emails, marginal comments on seminar papers, and other examples of kindness to publish as a testimony that not all academics are brutish self-centered narcissists who delight in tearing apart the work of others for sport,” according to a post from its moderator, Rabia Gregory, an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Missouri at Columbia. “Many more do pay it forward with gifts of time, inspirational words, and random acts of kindness. By publicizing these acts of academic kindness I hope to document that generosity and compassion are normative in academia.”

Gregory said in an email interview: “If even a few readers are inspired to shift their own behavior and be a bit more generous, (lending microfilm or a cell culture, writing a constructive peer review or sending a thank-you note), that's fantastic.”

She got the idea for the page in November, after receiving a supportive email from a colleague and posting the following on Facebook: “Amazed all over again by the excessive kindness of some academics. If the deadline hadn't long since passed I'd propose a k'zoo session consisting of outtakes from generous messages and reviews. You know. To balance out the equally necessary venting of vicious bile.” (“K’zoo” refers to the International Congress on Medieval Studies at
Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, which last year featured a humorous but cringe-inducing dramatic reading of peer review outtakes.)

She started the Tumblr with her own post about once trying to buy a morning coffee at an academic conference. “As I stepped up to the counter to place my order, I saw a small handwritten note announcing the cafe only took cash,” she wrote. “Dismayed, I counted the coins in my wallet, then apologized and stepped out of line. A moment later, the senior scholar in line behind me bought me a cappuccino. When I asked for her name so that I could meet her later and repay her, and she said, ‘You don’t need to pay me back. But promise to pay it forward.’ ”

The senior scholar’s action and words “typify the unseen culture of kindness in academia this blog aims to document,” Gregory says.

Other posts, including those from Gregory’s friends and colleagues as well as strangers, describe similarly kind acts. Many document senior scholars taking the time to help out younger professors and graduate students.

“While doing my comps, I found myself in need of an obscure, unpublished Ph.D. I was still figuring out ProQuest [electronic research library] and I was trying to figure out a way to order it from the university,” reads one post. “As I was doing this, I sent a brief email to a very senior scholar whose work deals with the material in this dissertation and asked if he could recommend the best way to find a copy of it.”

In response, the scholar “sent the entire dissertation to me by mail -- in two packages because it took him a while to photocopy the whole thing (I should also note that I live in a different country, so it would not have been cheap to send). A very kind and unexpected gesture!”

Another post describes a senior scholar calling a grad student at home to help him revise the article he’d submitted to a journal. The scholar, who was editing the piece, did so to speed up the publication process.

“It was early fall, and she knew my C.V. would be going out with applications,” the post says. “Had she sent me the piece and requested the revisions, it would have taken longer. This way, I was able to list the article as accepted and in press in time for the job market.”

That post’s author, Curtis Perry, a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and interim associate dean for humanities and interdisciplinary programs in its College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, said the help was much appreciated back in 1993, another lean time for hiring (and before email was commonplace). Perry said he was inspired to share the story because “it was extraordinary and because it indicates a pragmatic awareness of the job market precariousness of grad students on the part of senior scholars who are often thought to be blinkered and oblivious to such things.”

Noelle Phillips, a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Toronto’s Centre for Medieval Studies, submitted the post about the photocopied dissertation. She said she wanted to share it because “graciousness and generosity should always be admired.”
ASK A SCIENTIST Q: What exactly are migraines?

By RACHEL ZAMZOW and DEANNA LANKFORD of MU's Office of Science Outreach

Wednesday, January 8, 2014 at 2:00 pm

This question was submitted by Melissa Wessel's Rock Bridge High School biology class.

A: "The brain doesn't feel pain, but blood vessels within and surrounding the brain do," says Brandi French, assistant professor of clinical and vascular neurology at the University of Missouri. Migraines originate from misregulated signals arising from the brainstem, which lead to severe pain as well as light and sound sensitivity. Sometimes auras, such as flashes of light or lightning-like visual sensations, might precede a migraine. Migraine pain can be debilitating, resulting in a headache that interferes with normal daily life activities.

"The good news is that migraines are not commonly an indication of something more serious, such as a brain tumor or an aneurism," French notes. Only about 1 percent of individuals suffering from migraines will later be diagnosed with a more-serious condition.

Medication is available to treat migraines, ranging from over-the-counter pain medications to prescription antidepressants and anti-seizure medications. "Don't wait until you feel the headache pain to take medication; take action as soon as you sense an aura," French said.

Interestingly, migraines might also be treated with something as simple as a lifestyle change, such as not skipping meals, getting enough sleep and exercising several times per week. "A recent study has shown that regular exercise can be just as effective as the leading oral medication for migraines," French said. Supplements such as vitamin B-complex, vitamin D and magnesium also can be helpful in treating migraines. Even though migraines are common, they are very treatable and preventable. Keep in mind that a healthy lifestyle can make a big difference in your health and how you feel each and every day.