

USC launches new office to oversee complaint monitoring and investigations

As a centralized hub for managing complaints across the university, the USC Office of Professionalism and Ethics will provide greater oversight and accountability



USC has established a new Office of Professionalism and Ethics. *Photo by Michael Owen Baker*

By Eric Lindberg | September 20, 2018

USC HAS ESTABLISHED A NEW OFFICE TO manage complaints of misconduct across both of its campuses.

The goal of the USC Office of Professionalism and Ethics is to provide university leaders with the information they need to respond quickly when problems arise.

As the central clearinghouse for all investigations, the office will track ongoing investigations to ensure they are completed as quickly as possible and that corrective action is taken to protect

the USC community.

“The goal is to spot and act swiftly on red flags anywhere in the university they might turn up,” said Carol Mauch Amir, senior vice president for legal affairs and professionalism, who has overarching accountability for the new office. “The only way to do that is to have one central database that can track and manage all of the investigations, ensure consistency of responsive action and share outcomes with the community. By acting quickly on complaints and communicating with

stakeholders, we will work to restore trust with the university community.”

The office will be headed by a new vice president for professionalism and ethics, Michael Blanton, who joined the university in January 2017 as vice president for athletic compliance. The USC Office of Athletic Compliance became highly regarded under his predecessor, Dave Roberts, setting what Blanton described as a “gold standard” for oversight of student-athletes, coaches and other staff members.

Blanton said he expects the Office of

Professionalism and Ethics will similarly serve as a national model, and he vowed to share any lessons he learns with his counterparts at other institutions.

Students, faculty members and employees can now report any complaint directly to the Office of Professionalism and Ethics, including through an anonymous and confidential hotline, in addition to contacting established offices that accept complaints. The new office will also oversee existing regulatory departments, such as the Office of Equity and Diversity, Title IX and the Office of Athletic Compliance, which are tasked with investigating potential discrimination, workplace conflict, inappropriate behavior and other serious issues.

The new structure was established to address previous gaps in how information was siloed in various places around the university. Different departments had pieces of information, but there were no centralized processes for tracking all facts for certain incidents of misconduct or other issues. This new office will ensure greater communication and consistency among the university's various investigative units, Blanton said.

"All of these departments handle various types of complaints, whether it's compliance issues involving a student-athlete or bullying in the workplace or someone creating a hostile work environment," he

said. "This new office will bring together all that information from both campuses to ensure that something doesn't slip through the cracks."

USC leaders stress importance of equality and fairness in complaint process

Blanton said the strong message he has received from the university's leadership, including interim President Wanda M. Austin, is emphasize accountability and evenhandedness in investigations into sensitive and often contentious issues and to communicate with impacted stakeholders throughout the process.

"We don't want situations where one school or department has the same conduct issue as another, yet they have vastly different punishments or outcomes," he said.

USC has established policies for disciplinary processes that are specific to various groups at the university, Blanton explained, including faculty members, hospital employees, students and staff members. "Although we won't involve ourselves in those disciplinary procedures," he said, "we will track that process to ensure it happens with consistency and integrity."

USC Office of Professionalism and Ethics will keep USC leaders informed

A crucial component of Blanton's role involves reporting on high-risk investigations,

trends in complaints and other important matters to the university's top administrators. In addition to providing regular updates to Amir, he will have direct lines to the USC president and the chair of the USC Board of Trustee's audit and compliance committee.

"The university is entrusting this office and me with a lot of responsibility, and the commitment to integrity is as high as it goes," Blanton said. "If some issue requires a report beyond my boss, then I'm free to make it without any concerns."

In the spirit of openness, he envisions developing regular reports that describe in general terms the various types of misconduct and other issues occurring at USC, similar to the annual security report issued by USC's Department of Public Safety.

He is also confident that as the university's employees, faculty members and students become familiar with the new complaint reporting and oversight process, they will feel more comfortable coming forward with their concerns.

"Once they see that the university is serious about this, I think it will encourage reporting, especially when they realize that results don't equal retaliation," Blanton said. "It's not going to happen instantly, but it's part of a culture shift. We're creating a model that will ensure fairness, accountability and diligence."