

## 31<sup>st</sup> & Pearl

### Martha Saunders on University Foundations

When USM president Martha Saunders stated that the main rationale for leasing a Beechcraft King Air from the USM Foundation was to avoid paying U.S. commercial airlines for university-related air travel, and to instead begin *paying ourselves* for the same, she effectively opened wide a door that has heretofore been swollen shut. For quite some time now a debate of sorts has been raging with regard to the “publicness” of university foundations. The foundations themselves claim to be legally independent of their university affiliates, and thus assert that they are absolved of the usual open records requirements facing government entities. Some foundations, such as the USM Foundation, are even hyper-vigilant about this privilege, refusing to grant oversight of individual endowments to the very individuals who set up those endowments. Many in the public, however, point out that foundations are usually granted physical space and labor support, complete with salaries and benefits, directly from their sister universities. USM foundation directors also report directly to the university presidents. All of this screams “public,” leading many to insist that university foundations are subject to the same sunshine requirements by which public educational institutions must abide.

When Saunders suggested that leasing the plane from the USM Foundation would be akin to *paying ourselves* for work-related travel, she clearly called into question the whole “private” status of such foundations. By *ourselves*, Saunders meant USM. Thus, in making her comment she equated USM with USMF. Clearly, the individual who “manages” the university believes that the university and its affiliated foundation are one in the same. Saunders’ comment is also more than just *that* – i.e., that USM = USMF. To many on the outside looking in, there’s a real negative connotation to the idea or phrase that *we’re paying ourselves* when airplanes owned by foundations are then leased by their university affiliates. This negative connotation – a sense of “backdoor dealing” even – simply *begs* for public oversight into foundations’ relationships with their sister universities. Saunders’ comment actually leaves a bad taste in one’s mouth, one that can be made better only by a more oversight and scrutiny from the outside. Isn’t it time this happened?

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*31st & Pearl is a series housed at usmnews.net that features commentary on aspects of life in the CoB from a variety of columnists.*