

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

## Something Different

As president of USM from 2002-07, Shelby Thames had a specific vision for what the institution should become. He wanted to expand the sciences at the expense of the liberal arts. He pushed funded research, profit centers, and faculty entrepreneurship, and he enlisted a cadre of local business people to support this vision. Most USM faculty disagreed, and rightly so. They coalesced, and made administrative life difficult for Thames. Eventually, Thames' disastrous regime ended without irreparably harming the nearly 100 year old university.

Since Thames departed the Aubrey K. Lucas Administration Building in 2007, Martha Saunders has been presiding over the institution. Saunders' reign has brought a much different situation to USM, which in many ways has been much worse than that brought by Thames. Saunders arrived to face a fatigued faculty, worn down by a five-year battle against Thames, the Mississippi IHL, and local business and community leaders. Saunders quickly took advantage of this reality. She leased a \$2 million airplane, she buckled to long-time USM athletics supporters and fired popular USM football coach Jeff Bower, she used USM funds to support a \$325,000 renovation to the master bedroom suite in the president's mansion, and she shifted resources from the academic side of the house to that of central administration. One place where the latter can be easily seen is communications and public relations, Saunders' interest areas.

Since Saunders' early days, the economy has gone south, as has Saunders' response to it. Almost 50 tenured and tenure-track faculty were handed pink slips from 2009-10 in an effort, by Saunders, to address massive budget cuts. The result now is that USM no longer has an economics faculty, and other academic areas have been relegated to the institution's basement. Under Saunders' leadership, the whole academic side of the institution – not just liberal arts, or any other *single* area – has been devalued. These days the focus is more on strategic fencing of the campus, presidential jaunts, via the aforementioned airplane, to various Tena Clark productions, and USM sports. The *general* malaise that Saunders has created at USM has been different, and likely worse, than anything done to the institution by Thames.

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*31st & Pearl is a series housed at [usmnews.net](http://usmnews.net) that features commentary on aspects of life in the CoB, and at USM, from a variety of columnists.*