

## ***A Walk Through the History of Southern Miss***

### **Part 2**

usmnews.net continues a new series revisiting nationally embarrassing events in the history of Southern Miss. This morning we continue with "[Tablegate](#)".



November 23, 2011 by [Jennifer Howard](#)

## **State Auditor, College Board Investigate U. of Southern Mississippi Over Tablets**

The Mississippi state auditor's office and the state's higher-education board want to know whether the University of Southern Mississippi violated state law when it purchased 700 tablet computers last summer and gave them to students. The university paid Blackboard \$432,000 for the Samsung Galaxy tablets and related services, according to the *Hattiesburg American*, which [reported](#) the investigation yesterday.

Investigators want to know whether the university followed state law, which requires that state agencies take public bids for purchases that exceed \$50,000. The Blackboard deal may also have violated a higher-education-board policy that requires board approval for contracts that exceed \$250,000. The possible violations were uncovered by an internal university audit last month, the *Hattiesburg American* report said.

Three university employees, including the chief information officer and the director of procurement and contract services, have been placed on administrative leave, the newspaper said. "I'm very, very, very saddened by this situation," said

Martha Saunders, the university's president. "I'm saddened by the fact that I have employees caught up in this."

Three senior administrators were suspended. Two are no longer employees of the University. Saunders subsequently declared herself "tired" and resigned as president. Southern Miss and the nation also got a clear picture of the character, or lack thereof, of the now former president.

## “I Assumed . . . the Details had been Handled Properly”

USM PRESIDENT MARTHA SAUNDERS DISTANCES HERSELF FROM LATEST SCANDAL

“I’m very, very, very saddened by the situation. I’m saddened by the fact that I had employees that have been caught up in this.”

Martha Saunders, USM President

“I was not unaware of the program. I assumed that all the details had been handled properly.”

Martha Saunders, USM President

Thanks largely to *The Hattiesburg American’s* veteran higher education reporter Ed Kemp’s recent work, members of the USM family perhaps now have their best glimpse at the character, or lack thereof, of USM president Martha Saunders. With the latest USM scandal – improper use of hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funds to provide Samsung Galaxy Tabs to students, faculty, and politicians – growing in scope and seriousness, Saunders is spending her time and energy in an effort to completely distance her name from the malfeasance associated with events surrounding that scandal. Kemp’s 23-November-2011 [news report](#) for *The Hattiesburg American* entitled “Auditor looking at tablet program,” the Mississippi (and wider) public learned that the program not only provided hundreds of USM students with the Samsung technology devices, both *faculty* and *state officials* were recipients, including Mississippi Higher Education Commissioner Hank Bounds. According to Caron Blanton, Mississippi IHL spokesperson, Bounds was sent one of the Samsung tablets by USM officials earlier in the fall (2011), however Blanton claims that the tablet was returned to USM in unused condition by Bounds. Still, the actions by USM executives have prompted a state audit that is being handled by both State Auditor Stacey Pickering and officials with the IHL. That audit is, among other things, looking into whether the \$400,000+ contract effected by USM violated state law, part of which states that university contracts as large as \$250,000 must receive IHL Board approval. Blanton told Kemp that the USM contract never appeared before the IHL Board, which is represented by the Mississippi Attorney General’s office.

Meanwhile, USM president Martha Saunders is working feverishly to distance herself from the scandal, telling Kemp that she is “very, very, very saddened . . . that [her] employees . . . have been caught up in” this serious issue. Saunders is, of course, referring to former USM provost Robert Lyman, chief information officer Homer Coffman, and procurement/contract services director Mike Hemdon, all of whom were placed on administrative leave by Saunders last week. Saunders also added (in her interview with Kemp) that, although she was aware of the Galaxy Tab program, she was in the dark about the contract and the details surrounding it. Saunders informed Kemp that *iTech* contracts do not come across her desk for review, and that she assumed that any contract involving the Samsung tablets had been administered properly by *iTech*. Sources tell USMNEWS.net that Saunders is clearly attempting to dodge any and all responsibility in this case, and, in doing so, she appears about as *unpresidential* as a university president can appear. They also add that her comments relating to how relaxed contracting procedures are at USM, thus implicating any and all state agencies/institutions in similar practices, seem to suggest that perhaps millions of taxpayer dollars are inappropriately spent each year, and such taxpayer fleecing is practically undiscoverable. Lastly, sources tell USMNEWS.net that, at the very least, USM faculty and staff now know much more about the character, or lack thereof, of the individual who is currently sitting atop the 100 year old institution of higher learning in Hattiesburg.