

Confirmation of Willis' *New Title* Not Playing Well

HATTIESBURG – The [recent announcement](#) that USM human resources director/interim CFO Russ Willis [has been named](#), pending IHL approval, USM's *new permanent vice president for administrative affairs* is not going over so well among the greater USM community. From comments on the *USM Forum – Message Board* to letters to USMNEWS.net, followers of events at USM are noting that the Martha Saunders administration has perhaps “pulled one over” on its constituents by discreetly amending Willis' title *and* responsibilities at USM. In a recent e-mail to the “Southern Miss Community,” Saunders also seems to be attempting to revise history, by stating that Willis has been serving as “vice president” since August of 2010. The text of that e-mail is inserted below:

Dear Southern Miss Community:

Pending IHL Board approval, I am appointing Russ Willis as Vice President of Administrative Affairs, effective July 1, 2011. In addition to his duties as Director of Human Resources, Russ has been serving as interim vice president since August 31, 2010. The University will conduct a national search for a new Director of Human Resources.

As Vice President of Administrative Affairs, his duties include overall financial management of the University and its physical plant. Russ will be assisted by the Assistant Vice President for Financial Affairs, Allyson Easterwood, and Director of the Physical Plant, Chris Crenshaw.

Russ is respected by all who know him and works tirelessly for our University. I am honored to have him on my team.

Southern Miss – To The Top!

Martha Saunders

As long-time followers of Southern Miss are aware, with the Aug-2010 [resignation](#) of USM chief financial officer Joe Morgan, Willis *added* the title of interim CFO to his human resources directorship. This [addition took effect](#) on 1-Sept-2010, at which point Willis' salary rose from \$93,450 to \$120,000. At no point during the transition process between Morgan and Willis was Willis referred to by the Saunders administration as an *interim-vice president*. Even as recently as late Nov-2010, Willis was being referred to by *The Student Printz* simply as USM's interim CFO.

It was USMNEWS.net's crack news team that first “outed” the Saunders administration's plan to provide Willis with the *new title* of interim-vice president of administrative affairs via its 26-Oct-2010 [. . . breaking news . . . report](#) on Saunders' four year contract extension. That story was followed on 27-Oct-2010 with a [general report](#) at USMNEWS.net that also mentioned Willis' *new title* of VPAA. Sources state that this scoop is yet another reason why so many members of “the USM family” consistently follow USMNEWS.net. They also state that, as assistant vice president of financial affairs, Allyson Easterwood will essentially become (on 1-July-2011) USM's next chief financial officer, a post once held by Morgan. As such, both Willis *and* Easterwood

could be in line for large raises on 1-July-2011. One USM follower even pointed out that, given USM's current business model, it would seem to be a short step from vice president of administrative affairs to provost/vice president for academic affairs. If so, this reader suggests that all that may be required for Willis to assume control of the academic side of USM is for USM provost Robert Lyman to "resign" (step aside). If such speculation proves accurate, sources tell USMNEWS.net that what ever blur exists now in the contrast between the Saunders administration and the Shelby Thames administration (2002-07) will become much clearer, revealing eerily similar situations.

Finally, in referring to Willis as an on-campus "up and comer," Saunders fails to realize that, as university president, she has everything to say about who is "up and coming" among members of the USM family. Deeming Willis an "up and comer" appears, to sources at least, to simply be a recognition of her own institutional power, and little more. Thus, more and more, this story looks like the kind of episode that could send the campus morale meter to ever new lows. Stay tuned to USMNEWS.net for additional developments.