

Four More Years of Saunders

HATTIESBURG – The Mississippi IHL board [recently voted](#) to extend USM president Martha Saunders' contract for an additional four years. Speaking for the IHL, board president Bettye Neely stated that “[w]e feel very fortunate to have such [a] dedicated and visionary [leader at USM] . . . We appreciate [Saunders’] leadership and commitment to putting students first, even in the difficult economic times we are facing today.” In [response to this news](#), Saunders stated that “[a]t Southern Miss, I have had the honor of working with some of the finest faculty, staff and students anywhere on the planet . . . I never, ever take this place for granted.”



Saunders



Neely

Interestingly, USM [human resources director](#) and [interim chief financial officer](#), Russ Willis, also provided comments on Saunders' contract extension.¹ The USM presser linked above, however, lists Willis as USM's interim vice president for administrative affairs. Many USM faculty and staff will, no doubt, now be wondering whether [Willis](#) has received yet [another promotion and substantial raise](#), as he did in recent weeks when “interim CFO” was [added](#) to his title. Lastly, the USM presser lists Saunders' strategic efforts as (1) a climate for academic success, (2) an enhanced national image, (3) stronger connections with the community, and (4) a culture of healthy minds, bodies and campuses. On these fronts, sources point out that Saunders has failed miserably, by (1) delivering almost 50 termination letters to tenured/tenure-track faculty (in 2009 and 2010) and [slashing](#) various [academic programs](#), (2) [allowing](#) USM to [fall to the bottom](#) of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, while at the same time [rising to the top](#) on a [number](#) of other ignominious fronts, (3) failing to [properly](#) address [budget](#) and other [concerns](#), including signing a \$2 million [airplane lease](#) in the middle of an economic crisis, and (4) fostering a [campus climate](#) of [excessive alcohol consumption](#), partying, and [the kinds of behavior](#) unbecoming of a [serious](#) academic institution. Sources offer the conclusion that, given these outcomes, Saunders' contract extension was bought and paid for by the silence of USM's faculty, which has essentially stood on the sidelines while the institution has spiraled downward under her leadership.

¹ According to Willis, “I am thrilled to hear that Dr. Saunders' contract as president of the University of Southern Mississippi has been renewed for another four years. I believe that Dr. Saunders is the right leader at the right time for the university. She has shown during her time here unwavering dedication and perseverance in furthering the goals of the university. She has set for Southern Miss an ambitious agenda that will take the university to even higher levels of excellence.”