

## USM President Martha Saunders Resigns Suddenly

HATTIESBURG – A press conference was hastily called for the morning of 27-Apr-2011 on the campus of USM, and when the media and other interested parties arrived, they were greeted by USM president Martha Saunders, Mississippi IHL Commissioner Hank Bounds and IHL Board President Ed Blakeslee. Saunders opened with a very brief and detail-lacking statement indicating that, after leading USM to new heights in several areas, she was resigning as president of USM to, as she added during the Q&A portion of the event, return to the faculty of the 100 year old institution. Saunders' statement was followed by brief comments from both Blakeslee and Bounds, each reiterating much of what Saunders indicated in her own opening statement. Members of the media, the USM faculty senate, and other interested parties were reportedly shocked as they witnessed the unfolding of the press announcement.



USM president Martha Saunders counts accomplishments of her five-year as she announces her resignation. IHL Commissioner Hank Bounds, above left, and IHL Board president Ed Blakeslee, above right, listen on.

Within minutes of the presser, [local](#) and [state](#) media, the blogosphere, and various message boards and websites were in a frenzy, speculating on the rationale for Saunders' departure. One former high-level university administrator, speaking to USMNEWS.net on the condition of anonymity, indicated that it very unusual for a university president to resign suddenly near the end of an academic term, and thus not leaving time for a smooth transition to a permanent successor. Had Saunders announced her intention to resign back in Aug-2011 or Sept-2011, she could have remained as president through 30-June-2012, as she plans to do now, and a new permanent president could have been at the helm the next day, 1-July-2012. In USM's case, an interim president will have to hold the reins during the 2012-13 academic year. Our source also added that retiring presidents almost never return to the faculty, as Saunders indicated that she plans to do on 1-July-2012. According to the former university administrator who spoke to USMNEWS.net, retiring presidents usually retreat from public life, spending more time with family and other loved ones.

Most of those who are following this saga seem to share the intuition of the anonymous USM source. Many [are speculating](#) that the current [scandal](#) inside the USM [athletics department](#) forced Saunders out. Others add that the so-called "[Tabletgate](#)" scandal led to Saunders' ouster by [IHL officials](#). The latter scandal occurred largely over the summer and fall of 2011, and it cost the administrative job of Robert Lyman, the former USM provost, and the USM jobs of Homer Coffman (former USM chief information officer) and Mike Herndon (former director of procurements and contract services). Many believe that the Tabletgate issue also relates to [the decision](#) made in early 2012 by Russ Willis to [resign his post](#) as the USM vice president for administrative affairs, a post he had held for only about five months. The former scandal began in late fall of 2011, and is still ongoing. Just days separate today's press conference and a second set of harassment complaints being filed (with the Mississippi Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) against current interim USM athletics director Jeff Hammond by a high-ranking female official in the athletics department. Sources remind us, of course, that scandals grew almost without bound throughout the Saunders administration (2007-12), and that attaching any single one to Saunders' departure may be a difficult task.

Stay tuned to USMNEWS.net throughout the weekend and over the course of the next few weeks, as this situation is likely to develop even further.