

Willis Out, Driskell In . . . Even Deeper

HATTIESBURG – USM vice president for administrative affairs Russ Willis communicated with USM faculty and staff (via e-mail) late on 23-Jan-2012 (4:23 pm) about his recent decision to leave the VPAA position for another in the USM Foundation. According to Willis, this transition will be completed/effective on 1-Feb-2012, just one week from now. Willis' e-mail communique is inserted below:

From: all-facstaff-bounces@usm.edu [mailto:all-facstaff-bounces@usm.edu] On Behalf Of USM Mailout
Sent: Monday, January 23, 2012 4:23 PM
To: all-facstaff@usm.edu; all-students@usm.edu
Subject: [All-facstaff] Vice President for Administrative Affairs Transitioning to USM Foundation February 1

Effective February 1, 2012, I will be transitioning from the position of Vice President for Administrative Affairs to enter a role with the University Foundation. I truly appreciate my time both as the Vice President for Administrative Affairs and Director of Human Resources, and I appreciate the support of Dr. Saunders and the entire University community. I made this decision only after careful consideration over an extended period of time, and have come to the conclusion that the vice president's role would be better served at this time by a person who could see a large number of exciting but complex building projects to fruition. I look forward to working with the University Foundation as its Assistant Director for Fundraising Initiatives and Planned Giving, and I wish my interim replacement Chad Driskell and my permanent replacement the best of luck.

Russ Willis

According to Willis, the decision to move to the USMF was made “. . . only after careful consideration over an extended period of time . . .” Willis curiously added that he “. . . ha[s] come to the conclusion that the vice president's role would be better served . . . by a person who could see a large number of exciting but complex building projects to fruition.” Sources, as well as readers who have contacted USMNEWS.net about this story, characterize this comment by Willis as strange. Going further, the general consensus is that Willis' comment about the VPAA's role is a slap at, or an indictment of, the Martha Saunders administration of USM.



Russ Willis

Martha Saunders

The Saunders administration's take on Willis' decision [came via](#) Van Arnold's 23-Jan-2012 presser. In it, as in Willis' e-mail, Saunders explains that Willis is leaving the VPAA post to assume the role of assistant director for fundraising initiatives and planned giving in the USMF,

a position that USMNEWS.net sources say appears to be well below that of VPAA on the USM hierarchical tree. Arnold's press release also contains a curious quote from [Saunders](#) - "I understand and respect Russ' decision." Sources tell USMNEWS.net that by providing Arnold with such a quote, it is more likely that Saunders does *not* understand *or* respect Willis' decision (i.e., if she really did, such would not have been explicitly stated). Lastly, Arnold's presser also notes that Willis assumed [the permanent VPAA role](#) on 1-July-2011, meaning that he will have held the post only seven months on 1-Feb-2012, when he transitions to the USMF. Thus, one might conclude that, if Willis' truly gave the decision to move ". . . careful consideration over an extended period of time," he spent much, if not most, of his entire tenure (since 1-July-2011) in the permanent VPAA position in deep contemplation about relinquishing that same position.



Joe Morgan

The relatively new VPAA post at USM was borne out of the previous CFO (chief financial officer) post that was [mysteriously vacated](#) by Joe Morgan [in](#) Aug-2010. Willis became interim-CFO on 1-Sept-2010, a position that was added [to his](#) other title of director of human resources. Acceptance of [that interim post](#) also provided Willis with a \$26,550 (28.4%) raise, taking his salary up to \$120,000 per year. Later, in Feb-2011, Willis assumed the role of interim VPAA, a title that [appears to have replaced](#) that of CFO. At its Feb-2011 monthly meeting, the Mississippi IHL pushed Willis' salary (as VPAA and DoHR) all the way up to \$185,000, representing a raise of \$65,000 (54.2%). Thus, in less than six months Willis' salary had risen by \$91,550, going from \$93,450 on 31-Aug-2010 to \$185,000 on 1-Feb-2011. This represents a total increase of an astounding 98%, a mark that is likely unprecedented in USM history (for such a brief period of time).



Chad Driskell

Another major announcement in both Arnold's 23-Jan-2012 press release and Willis' e-mail is that [Chad Driskell](#), Saunders' executive assistant for [external relations](#), will be replacing Willis as USM VPAA on an interim basis. The [last time](#) USMNEWS.net readers heard from Driskell, other than about him benefitting from use of the USM airplane, came during the recent USM Research Foundation [scandal](#). Back then, Driskell served as Saunders' mouthpiece, [appearing](#)

[to deflect local media](#) from the details surrounding the USMRF scandal, [one that allegedly involved](#) more than \$850,000 in [malfeasance](#). As such, to USMNEWS.net sources and several USMNEWS.net readers, the Saunders administration appears to be descending further into the murky depths with this latest news.



Robert Lyman Denis Wiesenburg

Finally, this latest news likely only further worsens faculty morale at USM. In addition to all of the sordid history (scandals) recounted above, which provides some context for the recent decisions made by Willis and Saunders, reading (in Arnold's press release) that Saunders plans to conduct ". . . an expedited national search for a permanent replacement for Willis in the vice president's role" must come as a gut-shot to an already disheartened faculty. That is because the search for a permanent replacement for Robert Lyman, the USM [provost who resigned](#) that post back in the middle of Nov-2011 ([amid clouds](#) surrounding the [Tabletgate Scandal](#) at USM), would not even begin until the end of the 2011-12 academic year, when Denis Wiesenburg's interim provost appointment is set to expire. This would mean that a search for a new *chief academic officer* would not begin until July or August of 2012, and would not likely be completed until late in the 2012-13 academic year. Such a timetable would also mean that USM will likely go 18 months or more without a permanent provost. Meanwhile, a search and replacement for the VP of *administrative affairs* will have come and gone well before that time, if Saunders' plan comes to fruition. Surely, what these plans say about Saunders' priorities must be troubling to most in the USM community.