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## **WDAM-TV: Saunders Forced Out of USM Presidency**

HATTIESBURG – Investigative reporting by WDAM-TV's Randy Swan and the station's 7 on Your Side news team has uncovered documents relating to Martha Saunders' April-2012 resignation from the USM presidency. At her spring press conference to announce her resignation, Saunders, flanked by IHL commissioner Hank Bounds and IHL Board president Ed Blakeslee, stated that she was resigning after five years at the helm in order to rest and reenergize herself as she headed back to teaching at USM's coast campus. Now, the USM community is learning, thanks to official documents obtained by WDAM-TV via an open records act request, that the IHL Board forced Saunders' resignation and drafted an agreement whereby she would publicly claim that she was stepping down voluntarily.



## **More Information Released on Martha Saunders Resignation**

According to Swan's 12-Nov-2012 report, "[t]he exact reasons behind Saunders' resignation from Southern Miss may never be known, but it's becoming more apparent that she fell out of favor with the state college board. Saunders' exit was carefully orchestrated by the board days before her resignation." One of the documents obtained by WDAM-TV states that Saunders agreed to step down from the USM presidency, effective 30-June-2012. According to Swan, this document was dated 23-April-2012, or **four days before** the 27-April-2012 press conference wherein the USM and wider communities first learned of the situation. Swan reports that the agreement ". . . states [that] Saunders will not make any personnel decisions . . . [and that i]t also contains a three sentence mutually agreed upon announcement, saying she would resign for personal reasons."

While Swan's reporting confirms the belief held by many in the USM community prior to learning of the existence of these documents, it does break some new ground that USMNEWS.net sources say will likely surprise many in that same USM community. According to Swan's report, "[t]he document states that Saunders shall be employed full-time as a nontenured professor at Gulf Park and shall report to the USM vice president in charge of the Gulf coast campus." This facet of the agreement indicates that Saunders was not granted tenure at USM in May of 2007, when she left the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, where she served as chancellor, to assume to presidency in Hattiesburg. As such, at the time of her "resignation" in April-2012, she was unable to slide easily into a tenured or even tenure-track faculty line. Still, the report obtained by WDAM-TV goes even further on this issue, stating that "[h]er salary was set at \$110,000 a year and could be renewed for up to two additional one year terms." This line indicates that, at best, Saunders would remain on the USM faculty through only the 2014-15

academic year, while at worst her time on the USM faculty would end after the 2012-13 academic year. This part of the written agreement explains why Saunders is now doing her best to exit the stage at USM. As regular readers of USMNEWS.net are aware, Saunders was recently named as one of three finalists for the provost opening at the University of West Florida, where Saunders' higher education administration career began about two decades ago. A decision on a new provost is expected from UWF officials at any time.

Swan's report indicates that additional documents are expected to arrive in the near future. Stay tuned to both *WDAM-TV 7 on Your Side* and USMNEWS.net for breaking news on these issues.