

CoB at a Crossroads

PART 1

Many followers of the trials and troubles of USM's College of Business believe that the institution has been forever relegated to bottom of the academic food chain. Others recognize the many problems, yet they still have hope that the organization can be turned around. However, even those in this group understand that if a turnaround is to succeed, it must begin with the hiring of the CoB's next Dean. This new series, "CoB at a Crossroads," takes a multi-part look at the many problems that the new Dean of the CoB will face as the 2008-09 academic year begins.

The Gunther Era: Waste, Scandal, and Farhang

One can't understand where the CoB is today without delving into the past, at least a bit. Many of the CoB's current difficulties can be traced back as far as 1998, the year in which the William Gunther era in the CBA began. That year the CBA moved to replace Tyrone Black, its previous permanent dean, with a new leader.¹ The University's choice was William Gunther, a retiree from the University of Alabama. Aside from having put a full career in at the UofAL, sources say that Gunther brought to the CBA a relatively weak academic record, both in terms of teaching and research. There was nothing about Gunther that served as an academic role model. He was a full beneficiary of Alabama's defined benefit retirement system. So, on top of his \$100,000+ salary from USM, Gunther would be earning (by 1998) full retirement benefits from the neighboring state. In financial terms, sources say Gunther was a "made" man. They also say Gunther made, at that time, the ill-advised decision to purchase a large home in Canebrake, Hattiesburg's most upscale neighborhood. The gold bracelet-adorned new Dean, Gunther, also purchased a Volvo from a Montgomery, AL-based dealership -- the first of a few moves made by Gunther over the years that would show disdain for Mississippi's taxpayers.

One of Gunther's first moves as Dean involved expanding the central administration of the CBA. He developed the CBA's Undergraduate Services office, which was housed in JGH 110 and employed an administrative assistant (to the Dean) and a number of full-time academic advisors.² This move would be one of (if not *the*) single largest expansions of central administration in the history of the CBA/CoB.

Gunther's other main initiative was promotion of a new building for USM's business college. That effort put Gunther away from the CBA for significant amounts of time. It also put him in the company of the CBA's jet-setting *private* supporters, who often provided Gunther (and others) with trips to visit business school facilities at institutions in the western United States, such as the University of Denver and others. According to one source, the Gunther administration squandered \$180,000 in private money by financing architectural designs (for the new facility) from a Memphis-based architectural firm promoted by Business Advisory Council member, Gene Carlisle.³ Gunther's close

¹ Today's CoB was known as the College of Business Administration (CBA) back in 1998.

² Before Gunther arrived as Dean, JGH 110 had been a classroom. Adjacent to JGH 110 was a business student lounge, which was also swallowed up by the UG Services office complex.

³ It's now 2008 and the CoB is no closer to a new facility than it was back in 1998, when Gunther arrived on the scene.

association to these jet-setters also led to trips to places such as California's Napa Valley, where the Gunthers enjoyed wine and cigars and the company of USM's Business Advisory Council members. Gunther's association with the jet-setters became so close that, after being fired as the Dean of USM's CBA by then-USM president Shelby Thames, Carlisle and others led an effort to convince Thames to retain Gunther. That effort failed, despite the fact that Carlisle and other members of the group had pledged to donate millions of dollars to the business school shortly after Gunther was released.

One of the bigger scandals of the Gunther administration took place shortly after his arrival in 1998. Gunther continued to teach night courses in the UofAL's executive MBA (EMBA) program in Tuscaloosa, raking in large installments of money with each assignment. This scandal was uncovered by reporters here at USMNEWS.NET, and readers can find actual documentation provided to USMNEWS.NET by the UofAL via public records requests. This documentation shows that Gunther earned thousands of dollars by working for UofAL at the same time that he was Dean of USM's College of Business Administration.

Even five years after being fired as the Dean, Gunther continues too be involved in scandalous activity. Today he is the Director of the CoB's Bureau of Business and Economic Research, a part-time administrative position that provides Gunther with a one-course reduction in teaching load. Combined with his 3-hour release for being "Professionally Qualified," Gunther's teaching load in the CoB is 2/2, yet he still manages to avoid doing academic research.⁴ Not only that, Gunther's service in the BBER essentially involves only periodic placement of Internet printouts on a JGH bulletin board that show national/state economic trends. For that Gunther is paid \$125,000 over the 9 academic months. This money is used to finance the \$500,000 estate in Josephine, AL, that Gunther resides in, and commutes to USM from.

Even considering all of the issues involving Gunther discussed above, Gunther's most fateful decision as CBA Dean would be his choice of economics professor, Farhang Niroomand, as Associate Dean of the CBA. From 1998-2007, Niroomand would rule USM's business school with an iron hand. According to sources, Niroomand's rule included dominion over salary offers (for new hires) and merit raises, and teaching loads/schedules and service assignments. No small detail, from office assignments to graduate assistant allocations, escaped Niroomand's reach. And, as sources put it, Niroomand used his power to enrich himself in ways never seen in the CBA/CoB, and to harass and mistreat others, particularly staffers. As such, Niroomand will be an important figure in future installments in the series.

⁴ Gunther is the only economist in the CoB who is not "Academically Qualified" by the CoB's AACSB definitions.