

The Curious Behavior of Rodney Bennett

April 5, 2013, Dr. Bennett meets the Faculty Senate. A Hattiesburg American reporter is in attendance. As expected, the reporter's newspaper published a story:

April 6, 2013

USM faces \$80M funding cut from state

By Ed Kemp

American Staff Writer

One of new University of Southern Mississippi President Rodney Bennett's early challenges will be a fight for his school's proper share of funding from Jackson.

A new state College Board funding formula, still being revised by board's trustees, could cut Southern Miss's state appropriation – approximately \$80 million annually – by over 11 percent over time.

Before the formula is finalized by the College Board, Bennett said he wants to know more about the process behind it. "We've been seeking clarity from Jackson on how they got to where they got," said Bennett addressing the faculty senate Friday.

It was Bennett's first address as president to the faculty senate. Prior to speaking, he received lavish praise from outgoing interim president Aubrey Lucas for his first week on the job.

Lucas lauded Bennett for securing \$20 million from the Legislature for the new College of Nursing building, as well as \$2.8 million for tornado repairs and musical instrument purchases in light of the devastating Feb. 10 tornado.

"Things are all right, now that Rodney's here," said Lucas. "He's got the Legislature in his hand."

"Don't jinx me," responded Bennett with a laugh.

Bennett then responded to less convivial voices, as faculty members expressed their concerns about what the funding formula means – and not just for its financial ramifications.

Their worries center on a slew of state College Board charts and graphs supporting the funding revisions that seem to cast Southern Miss in an unfavorable light.

For example, they show Southern Miss sinking below its fellow state universities in enrollment growth since 2006.

Meanwhile, charts labeled with such titles as net assets per students, faculty salaries and debt service coverage also have Southern Miss lagging behind the state's public university average.

"This conforms to their understanding of what USM is," stated faculty senator Andrew Haley, a history professor. "This is the impression that we have left up in Jackson that we need to be combating in the future."

Provost Denis Wiesenburg said the university is asking Bounds to supply the raw numbers behind the charts, in order to "perhaps analyze that data ourselves in order to make sure that we understand the raw numbers and what they really mean."

Senator Dick Conville, a professor of communication studies, suggested that Bennett even provide his own data to the board that is friendlier to Southern Miss's cause, such as the way the university rakes in the second most external funding in the state annually.

"I could see us making our own set of charts and distributing them to the board," said Conville.

Bennett responded that all strategies are on the table. He urged faculty members to give suggestions, channeled through Faculty Senate President Mary Ann Adams, to bolster Southern Miss's funding case.

"Our position is much stronger when we speak together as one voice in unison," he said.

Bennett's rush to "correct" the news (But why?):

From: all-facstaff-bounces@usm.edu [all-facstaff-bounces@usm.edu] on behalf of USM Mailout [usmmailout@usm.edu]
Sent: Monday, April 08, 2013 1:29 PM
To: all-facstaff@usm.edu
Subject: [All-facstaff] Message from the President Regarding Proposed Change to Board of Trustees Funding Formula

Faculty and Staff,

You may have read over the weekend an erroneous report in the Hattiesburg American that our university faces an \$80 million state funding cut—the result of a proposed revision to the Board of Trustees formula used to direct funds to each of the state's higher education institutions. Let me be clear, there is no evidence to support \$80 million in cuts, **and the Hattiesburg American has issued a correction.** [Emphasis added.]

The revised funding formula currently under consideration by the trustees contains performance benchmarks related to student retention, progression, and graduation rates. Universities that support student success best will be rewarded under the proposal. Our

communication with the board related to the funding formula continues to be excellent, and the trustees are using accurate data related to enrollment growth, faculty salaries, and more, to guide their decision.

With that in mind, I encourage you to remember that every interaction with a student creates an opportunity for you to say or do something that helps them succeed. We should, and must, do all that we can to support students. If you work at Southern Miss, you are an educator, and I expect that we are all working toward creating pathways to degree completion for our students.

If a revised formula is approved, I will ensure that the campus is informed of the formula's effects on the university budget so that together we can strategize to maximize our funding opportunities.

Rodney Bennett, President

Here's the only correction to the April 6, 2013 article:

“USM officials discuss possible state funding cuts

Editor's note: The original headline to this story was incorrect and has been changed.”

All the rest of the article remained the same. Did Dr. Bennett know what he was talking about?

Then, on April 9, 2013, Bennett corrects his correction of the news:

From: all-facstaff-bounces@usm.edu [all-facstaff-bounces@usm.edu] on behalf of USM Mailout [usmmailout@usm.edu]

Sent: Tuesday, April 09, 2013 8:08 AM

To: all-facstaff@usm.edu

Subject: [All-facstaff] Message from the President Regarding the University Budget

Faculty/Staff,

I am pleased to report to you that IHL Commissioner Hank Bounds has indicated to me that The University of Southern Mississippi will not receive a cut in its state appropriation for the upcoming fiscal year, beginning in July 2013.

While this is good news, we must remain vigilant in our commitment to ensuring student success. Student retention, progression and graduation demand our continued attention, now and in the future.

I will continue to keep you apprised of any significant updates related to the university budget.

Rodney Bennett, President

All-facstaff mailing list

All-facstaff@usm.edu

<https://listserv.usm.edu/mailman/listinfo/all-facstaff>

Why didn't Bennett consult Bounds before meeting with the Faculty Senate on April 5, 2013? If the Hattiesburg American report was inaccurate, why didn't Bennett insist that the article itself in detail be retracted or corrected? In fact, the article in detail was exactly the same. Does President Bennett know what he's doing? Anyone in higher education for as short a period as one year knows that talking about a significant reduction in appropriations had better accurate.