

## *Editorial*

# **Do You Really Believe USM Administrators?**

Many times I made the effort to check details behind USM administrators' representations. USM administrators tend to manage, manipulate, misrepresent—take your choice of words—statistics and cost records to conceal their mismanagement. For example, Martha Saunders and her subordinate administrators insisted that the airplane she bought with student and taxpayer money cost \$800 per flight hour, a really good deal in their view. It didn't matter that we were in the midst of the Great Recession and Saunders was laying off faculty because of financial exigencies. Problem was, when we obtained detailed records from USM, we learned the cost per flight hour was approximately \$6,000 and the plane was not used to advance the education of students but was used to junket Saunders, her husband and local and state politicians to sports events and meetings she could have driven to for a few dollars.

So, do you really believe USM administrators when they recently claimed they purposely accepted a decline in student population (and, therefore a reduction in income) in order to increase standards and quality of incoming students? (See, HA article, below.) USM administrators have trained me to believe them only upon review of the complete data they claim to be summarizing. If you'd like a good read, see, *How to Lie With Statistics*, by Huff and Geis. In this case, the past couple years' decline in student population at USM, administrators have an incentive to "lie with statistics" because of underlying problems that are driving students away from USM.

According to Dr. Bennett,

"While others across the country may have opted to grow enrollment at any or all costs, including quality, we have chosen a different path," Southern Miss President Rodney Bennett **said in a prepared release...** Southern Miss recently announced that the fall 2014 entering class is the most academically talented in the university's recorded history."

The key words here are "prepared release." Administrator "prepared releases" are written by a small army of USM public relations bureaucrats. Dictionary defines public relations as "professional maintenance of a favorable public image by a company or other organization or a famous person." Why believe them without proof? And "Recorded history"? What does that mean? Is this the fudge factor that they employ to parse the statistics to turn out the way they want? [When I was shown to USM's recorded history of data I had requested in a MORA, I was shown a dungeon of boxes of paper/documents rotting and water damaged.]

## USM officials say students better prepared for college

Mary Lett 10:03 p.m. CDT September 18, 2014



(Photo: Eric J. Shelton/Hattiesburg American)

University of Southern Mississippi freshman Colin Cameron's grade-point average in high school was 4.11. A Luckyday Citizenship Scholar, the 2014 Petal High graduate also earned a 26 on his ACT.

Cameron, one of 14,845 students enrolled for the fall 2014 semester, is exactly the type of exemplary student Southern Miss administrators want to attract. This fall's enrollment is slightly below fall 2013 when the university had 15,249 students, but administrators say they are pleased with the quality of students — despite the 2.6 percent decrease.

"While others across the country may have opted to grow enrollment at any or all costs, including quality, we have chosen a different path," Southern Miss President Rodney Bennett said in a prepared release. "We have chosen to be intentionally better and stronger."

"When presented a choice between bigger or better, USM will choose better — every time. Our long-term plan is to grow enrollment with more academically qualified students, supported by a highly qualified and student-centered faculty."

Southern Miss recently announced that the fall 2014 entering class is the most academically talented in the university's recorded history.

With an average GPA of 3.26, fall 2014 freshmen also have extended a five-year streak of rising grade-point averages, according to Southern Miss.

In fall 2013, the average high school grade point average of a first-time freshman was 3.21, up from 3.18 in fall 2012, 3.15 in fall 2011, 3.08 in fall 2010, and 3.06 in fall 2009. Also, the new freshman class has an average ACT score of 22.5 — the highest known in Southern Miss history.

Denis Wiesenburg, Southern Miss provost, said ensuring students are academically prepared for the coursework is a goal of the university.

"We've had an increase in the Honors College this year. Last year, we had 48 Presidential Scholars, this year that number is up to 71," said Wiesenburg, who noted the scholars had an average ACT score of 31.4.

Wiesenburg added officials knew the enrollment numbers would drop for a number of reasons including the application deadline being changed to June 30. For fall 2014, he said the university had about 150 fewer new freshmen. Previously, new freshmen could apply and gain admission through early in the fall semester. This year, new freshman applicants were only considered on a case-by-case basis after July 1.

"We realized that many students who apply at the very end in late August are not academically prepared," he explained. "They tend to have lower ACT scores, high school GPAs and couldn't meet the academic rigors of the university."

He said when students are academically prepared, the retention rate is higher.

Cameron said he considered several other universities and community colleges, but ultimately Southern Miss won out.

"It is such a great school, academically, it's close to home and had the programs I was interested in," said the 18-year-old, who is majoring in journalism. "Also, the people at Southern Miss really made it an easy choice."

Southern Miss also has enrolled more transfer students for each of the past five years than any other Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning institution, university administrators reported. For fall 2014, Southern Miss has 1,531 new transfers with an average GPA of 3.00.

Student retention remains a top priority and progress has been made in that area. The first-year retention rate from the fall 2013 class is 74.04 percent — an increase from 71.4 percent for fall 2012.

Increases also can be noted in the five-year graduation rate (2009 first-time, full-time freshman class) of 45.1 percent — the highest in more than 10 years; and the six-year graduation rate (2008 first-time, full-time freshman class) of 48.3 percent, up from 45.1 percent.

According to university figures, enrollment has increased at the Gulf Park campus in Long Beach with 2,880 students enrolled, up by 3.26 percent from 2,789 in fall 2013. The number of student credit hours produced by faculty based on the Gulf Park campus increased 2.24 percent from 23,742.5 in fall 2013 to 24,274 in fall 2014.

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<http://www.hattiesburgamerican.com/story/news/education/2014/09/18/college-enrollment-mississippi/1...> 9/19/2014