

The Saunders Sweepstakes

by Duane Cobb

With the hiring of former USM president Martha Saunders as the new provost at the University of West Florida, a number of individuals are in a position to win a sweepstakes of sorts. First and foremost among these is, of course, **Mona Amadeo**, the owner of *Idgroup*, the Pensacola-based consulting firm that benefitted, to the tune of almost \$1 million, from Saunders' leadership of USM from 2007 to 2012. Now, with Saunders in the second-highest ranking position at UWF, that public relations concern stands to double down, this time with Florida taxpayers' funds.

Since reaching the semifinals of the race to become the new UWF provost, Saunders has been more than effusive in her praise of UWF president **Judy Bense**. Saying how much she respects Bense to *The Hattiesburg American* while she was battling foes from Lamar University and Kennesaw State University for the UWF provost slot was a shrewd move for the former USM president. Now that Saunders is the race winner, putting those communications skills to work highlighting Bense's good deeds as UWF president, a job that will cement Bense's legacy at UWF, would certainly be appreciated by Bense. It would also put Saunders in a good position to succeed Bense, should Saunders wish that to occur at some point in the future.

What about Saunders' USM-affiliated cheerleaders? Imagine that CoH dean **Michael Forster** is, at some point in the near future, ready to cash in his PERS (i.e., Mississippi state retirement system) clock. If so, do you think Saunders might locate a dean's position at UWF for him? What about former faculty senate president **Timothy Rehner**? If you are new to

USMNEWS.net, Rehner was a constant supporter of Saunders, always willing to lend his hurrah to Ed Kemp, the higher education correspondent for *The Hattiesburg American*. If memory serves, Rehner holds a chair-level post at USM. Think Saunders could find the same for him at UWF, should he decide to monetize his PERS ledger? I would say so.

There are probably others at USM who supported Saunders while president and who could end up in important positions at UWF. There are also some others who seem to have gone underground. I wouldn't be surprised to see **Russ Willis**, the former VPAA at USM during the Saunders administration (2007-12), end up at UWF. Willis was also once USM's human resources director, as well as the institution's chief financial officer. That many hats only increase his odds of getting a nice gig in the Florida Panhandle.

One interesting figure in this saga is **Lee Gore**, the former legal counsel at USM who departed, near the end of the Saunders administration, to assume the same role at UWF. What role did he play in Saunders' quest to secure the provost position there? The sunshine laws in Florida that required the UWF search committee to post meeting minutes and other search-related documents are responsible for us now knowing that Gore sat in on every major meeting held by the search committee. Individuals who have participated with similar search committees at USM and elsewhere have reported that they don't recall having university legal counsel at every meeting. Was he there to ensure Saunders got *more than* a fair shot? Who knows, that could be the question before this saga ends.