

What do We Really Know about USM President Martha Saunders?

by Duane Cobb

It seems that just about each news article, press release or Internet bio of USM President Martha Saunders has five things in common. They each say that she (1) received a bachelor's from USM, her master's from Georgia, and her PhD from Florida State, (2) has spent "nearly 30 years" in higher education, and (3) has taught thousands of students. The fourth and fifth? (4) Each never offers much in the way of details about Saunders' teaching or research, and (5) each never offers many, if any, details on the dates that she received her three academic degrees. These two themes, and the other three above, are even present in [Saunders' bio on the IHL website](#).

It would seem that these tidbits of information have to be cobbled together from various individual sources. For example, a 2006 affinity piece on Saunders that appeared in USM Alumni Association [publications](#) indicates that she **received her bachelor's degree in French from USM in 1969**. However, that source gets vague when it comes to the dates of Saunders' master's degree from Georgia and her PhD from Florida State.

When Saunders was hired as Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater in 2005, [we were told](#) that she would be paid \$175,000 per year. Even then, however, the dates of her three university degrees remained a mystery. We were lucky when, at about the time Saunders was named USM's 9th president in the spring of 2007, the Grady College of Journalism at the University of Georgia recognized the accomplishment of its alumnae, Saunders, and in doing so [told the world](#) that Saunders **had earned her M.A. there in 1979**. They weren't much help, though, in letting us know when Saunders graduated from USM, or from Florida State. Luckily, we already knew about the USM degree, thanks to the USM Alumni Association's story from the previous year.

Back in 2005, when Saunders was named Chancellor at UW-W, the Wisconsin business community [was told](#) that Saunders was an award-winning teacher and a communications expert. They still didn't know when she earned her three degrees. At least Wikipedia [knew about](#) the 1969 bachelor's degree in French from Southern Miss, along with a lot of very bad things about Saunders' predecessor at USM, President Shelby Thames. In covering Saunders' March 2008 inauguration, USM's own *The Student Printz* [reminded us](#) of Saunders' 1969 B.A. from Southern Miss. It also informed us of Lt. Governor Phil Bryant's comment at the Saunders inauguration: "Southern Miss, our daughter's home."

In an April 2007 article, *The Clarion Ledger* [referred to](#) Saunders as "magnetic," and then informed us that, by Saunders' own estimation, she (Saunders) had taught more than 8,000 students during her academic career, an exercise "in the trenches" that also taught *her* a thing or two. That same *CL* piece reminded the world that the IHL's process in selecting Saunders was an "ultra-secretive" one. It would seem that the date of her PhD from Florida State might be an "ultra-secretive" thing too.

Finally, and thanks to a snippet in the [August 2007 issue](#) of the *Florida State Times* congratulating FSU alumnae, Martha Saunders, on being named USM's 9th President, we learned that Saunders **received her PhD from FSU in 1990**. So, Saunders received her bachelor's degree from Southern Miss ('69) **five years before** Interim CoB Dean Alvin Williams (USM, '74) received his, and yet Saunders received her PhD from Florida State ('90) **one year after** former USM Vice President of Research, Angie Godwin (Dvorak), received hers (FSU PhD, '89).

Interestingly enough, there is one source where all of Saunders' dates, and then some, were provided. That is the [March 2002 press release](#) from Columbus State University, announcing Saunders' hiring as CSU's Vice President for Academic Affairs. Saunders held this position, the second most important at CSU, *only 12 years after* receiving her PhD. CSU also provided other information, such as the fact that Saunders joined the faculty at the University of West Florida in 1986, which was *4 years before* receiving her PhD from FSU. *Just 10 years later, and only six years after* receiving her PhD, Saunders became the Associate Dean of WFU's College of Arts and Social Sciences. And, *just three years after that, and only 9 years after receiving her PhD*, Saunders became the Dean of WFU's new College of Arts and Sciences. With these (amazing) dates and positions, when did Saunders teach thousands of students and "wri[te] extensively on topics in her academic field of research"? Inquiring minds really want to know. While supplying the answer to this question, I'd also appreciate some help with the "almost 30 years" mathematics.

Remember Godwin, the former [19 year old University of Alabama grad assistant](#) who once brought [decades of academic experience](#) to the USM VP's office? These two, Saunders and Godwin, are beginning to look more and more alike to me. Now that's an intriguing thought, and one I hope spawns further investigation.