

Former IHL Board Member Describes Bleak Future for USM

Bill Crawford, a former Mississippi IHL Board member and Mississippi legislator from Meridian, penned an eye-opening editorial for *The Hattiesburg American* on 29-Sept-2010. That editorial, which is inserted below, details recent enrollment trends and future funding equations for Mississippi higher education. As you will see, it quite capably speaks for itself.

University growth gap widens

BILL CRAWFORD • SEPTEMBER 29, 2010

DAN JONES and Mark Keenum may need to bring bodyguards with them to future university presidents' meetings. Last fall, for the first time this century, Ole Miss and Mississippi State, together, enrolled more than half the university students in Mississippi. This fall, they widened the gap. The consequences of this trend could be telling.

First, the numbers. Fall, unduplicated headcount shows Mississippi State the largest university in the state with 19,644 students and Ole Miss a close second with 19,536. That's a total of 39,180 students. Add up Southern Mississippi's 15,778, Jackson State's 8,689, Delta State's 4,324, Alcorn State's 3,682, the W's 2,592, and Valley State's 2,491 and you get 37,556. That's a gap of 1,624 students. Last fall it was just 178 students.

This surge by Ole Miss and Mississippi State did not occur overnight. Ole Miss has increased its fall headcount every year since 1994, a trend begun under Robert Khayat. Mississippi State's surge began in 2007 under Doc Foglesong. But the pace of increase for both has accelerated under the leadership of Jones and Keenum. Consider this. Since 2005, Ole Miss and Mississippi State grew by 2,608 and 3,543 students, respectively, while all the other universities grew only 997. These five-year increases are more than the enrollment at the W and at Valley State. Consequently, the pressure is on both universities to add more classrooms, housing, and instructors. That means they need, and want, a bigger slice of the pie appropriated each year by the Legislature and divvied up by the College Board.

Now you begin to understand the tension among the presidents. There's more. In 2004, the College Board adopted a new funding formula, but only applied it to "new" money (increases in appropriations) to mitigate the impact on smaller universities. In 2009, the Board opted to apply the formula to old and new money, phasing it in over six years. While budget cuts and a PEER report have slowed implementation, the formula, when implemented, will reduce shares for five universities. Three - Mississippi State, Ole Miss, and Jackson State - will get more. From 2001 to 2009, Jackson State's enrollment under Ron Mason jumped up 24 percent. But, it turned down this year.

The surging enrollment at Ole Miss and Mississippi State will push them further into the money. Both College Board members and legislators find it hard to take money from smaller universities and give it to the big ones. Yet, at some point they will have to acknowledge that the enthusiasm, facilities, and programs Dan Jones and Mark Keenum offer at Ole Miss and Mississippi State are what a growing majority of students wants.

Bill Crawford is a former College Board trustee and legislator from Meridian.