

High School Students Now Questioning Competence of Saunders Administration

Saint Andrews Episcopal Students Scratch USM from Lists

According to Mary Margaret Halford's 30-Sept-2010 [report](#) for *The Student Printz*, more than two dozen students at Jackson's Saint Andrews Episcopal High School have written letters to USM provost Robert Lyman regarding the Martha Saunders administration's decision to eliminate the USM Latin program. Their teacher, Patsy Ricks, a Latin teacher of 40 years, told her SAEHS students about USM's decision, and her students jumped at the chance to offer their opinion on USM's decision, saying that they would not want to attend an institution that did not offer Latin.



One of the SAEHS students, Laura Landrum, told Halford that she is upset about USM's decision to cut Latin, adding "[t]his choice speaks to extremely ignorant judgment on the part of Southern's leaders . . . I can unfortunately say that I do not believe I will be applying to USM because it seems the leaders do not care to consider the students when making decisions about their futures." Sources tell USMNEWS.net that Landrum's concerns speak to ramifications of Saunders' decisions that she (Saunders) does not seem to understand. That is, when students see programs like economics and religion and philosophy being trimmed or eliminated, they know that *any program* is in jeopardy of being the next to go. In the face of such uncertainty, prospective students *and* faculty from all disciplines are wary of the idea of coming to USM.

Landrum's decision also appears to be part of a cascade, as she tells Halford that other SAEHS students are also re-evaluating USM as a prospective college destination. As Landrum informed Halford, "I know for a fact that [other students'] application decisions are greatly affected by the cuts. I believe USM is making a grave mistake in cutting Latin not only because of the loss of those in the major but because of the image it portrays for the school." Another interesting aspect of this particular story is the revelation that Leah Fonder-Solano, foreign languages and literatures chair at USM, has been receiving a large number of letters of support from students, alumni, other community members, other universities, law schools, and practicing doctors and lawyers. As Fonder-Solano explained to Halford, such letters "are pouring in."

In other news, Lesley Walters, a USM alum who is now a student in Mississippi College's School of Law, penned an [editorial](#) for the 30-Sept-2010 issue of *The Student Printz* entitled "Are we paying for entertainment or education?" Walter's essay asks more questions about the recent revelation that USM students and Mississippi taxpayers are providing millions of dollars annually to support the USM athletics program. The body of Walters' editorial is inserted below:

Are we paying for entertainment or education?

By Lesley Walters

Published: Thursday, September 30, 2010

After I graduated from USM in May, I was sure my focus would shift entirely to my new educational challenges at Mississippi College School of Law. But even now, as I sit in a civil procedure class, my mind is thoroughly wrapped up in the crisis facing my alma mater.

It's been like this since I learned that the Latin program, which helped to get me where I am today, is one of the dozen or so slated for elimination next year. I would share my lamentation with you at this outrageous idea, but I think my seven-page letter of appeal to the administration will do for now.

Everyone who happens to come across this publication should think long and hard about the priorities of any university but especially the one to which you (or a creditor) regularly pay thousands of dollars.

This brings me to my point: universities are essentially businesses that provide services to paying customers. What service are the customers paying so much for? The answer should always be an education, if nothing else. The customers – that is, the students – pay tuition in return for a chance to earn a degree.

From a business standpoint, it makes sense to keep your customers paying for as long as possible, which in a university context is generally at least three or four years, as long as the customers keep their promise to attend class and make average grades or better. To attract more customers, it also makes sense to provide extra services – student organizations, to build a sense of community; pep rallies and concerts, to keep the students entertained throughout the years; or sports teams, to create a tangible sense of loyalty. Many universities, including USM, provide these extra services to their students.

Tuition pays for the educational services, as well as the more entertaining ones. Student tuition makes up at least a third of USM's operating budget, and the rest is supplemented through alumni donations, endowments and state tax revenue.

State funding has decreased year after year, but USM has had record enrollment for at least the past two years, if not more. So although state funding is less, students pay higher tuition than ever, year after year. And because a college education is now practically mandatory, that customer base of students has increased substantially without any foreseeable decrease in the future.

An increasing number of students paying an increasing amount of tuition would seem to support the cost of at least the most basic services provided; and the most basic service a university can provide is education.

So why is USM cutting the education it provides, when there are so many other superfluous services that could be cut instead?

I would think that any person willing to shell out thousands of dollars in tuition over a 4-year commitment is not doing it to see whichever random artists the SGA picks to perform that year or to watch the Golden Eagles play in person. I

would also venture that no student picked USM because it has more than 250 student organizations, unless he or she was planning to write a book based on the effort to attend meetings at each and every one (which might be a good idea, if only to pay back those substantial loans). No, I'm pretty sure students choose USM for the education provided and the faculty who make it possible more than any other reason.

Now USM is cutting its faculty and its curriculum to sustain its operating budget. Well, USM, most of your operating budget comes from tuition rendered for an education, so what gives?

If USM is going to shift its focus from educating its "customers" to entertaining them, it then becomes a venue, not a university. If Hattiesburg wanted another convention center, it would have voted for one. The students at USM are paying for an education, so if USM decides to cut the kind of education it will offer, tuition should be cut, too.

But we all know that will never happen.

How does USM hope to keep its paying "customers" when it eliminates the specific services those students are looking for? This is no way to retain a student's business. It is not a path away from your problems, but a short-term decision that will lead to long-term deficits bigger than you had before. The point is USM's priorities are out of whack as both a university and as a business, and from an alumna's perspective, it's a damn shame.

Finally, Jason Dawsey of Hattiesburg, another USM alum, provided *The Hattiesburg American* with a thoughtful letter entitled "USM moving 'full speed in reverse'". That letter is inserted below:

USM moving 'full speed in reverse'

SEPTEMBER 30, 2010

Ed Kemp's article, "Program cuts puzzling" (Sept. 18), raised more troubling questions about the criteria for priorities underlying USM's recent, and shocking, round of cuts in faculty positions and academic programs. Everyone connected to the university deserves a thorough account of the rationale for these cuts. Were such brutal steps absolutely necessary? I am a proud graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi. I joined USM's Senior Honors program, completing a double major in history and philosophy. The rigor and quality of the academic work I underwent at USM allowed me to enter a graduate program at the University of Chicago. In recent years, I have had the opportunity to teach several undergraduate courses here. USM is an institution as well as a set of memories and experiences I cherish. Consequently, I was stunned and disheartened when I heard the news about the termination of several professors and the vast changes to many degree programs. Last Wednesday, President Martha Saunders, in an effort to reassure the Hattiesburg community, commented on the difficult times faced by the university. Tellingly, she referred to them as "adjustments." This term neither makes the decisions about cuts easier to accept nor makes them understandable to individuals on the outside of the process. Furthermore, President Saunders' description of USM as a "strong," "sound," "quality" university is contradicted by the direction the university is taking. Ed Kemp's piece should lead to serious scrutiny about the priorities now embraced by the administration at USM. The University of Southern Mississippi, my alma mater, is moving at full speed in reverse. It is hard to imagine how USM could be taken seriously as an institution of higher education without a viable economics department, a religion major or courses in German, Greek and Latin. For those of us who care deeply about the university's future, the far more unsettling question is: Should anyone take such a university seriously? And that is why we must know more.

Jason Dawsey
Hattiesburg