

## Is Russ Willis Now Running Southern Miss?

*How Saunders Almost Never Goes Anywhere without Him, and Why that May Be*

The Mississippi IHL recently [released the news](#) that USM president Martha Saunders has been awarded, and has accepted, a four year contract extension. Judging by his presence at her side on any occasion wherein a tough question about USM might be asked, the IHL's recent action on Saunders may have also extended USM human resources director *and* interim chief financial officer (*and*, maybe, its vice president for administrative affairs) Russ Willis' tenure at USM by *at least* the same four years. Willis was again by Saunders' side at the 26-Oct-2010 [Staff Town Hall Meeting](#), wherein Saunders stuttered and stammered her way through her opening speech, even though she continually referred to notes and recycled old ideas (e.g., *all the important metrics are up*) from other recent speeches. Yet again, Willis was there to take the stage to handle the tough questions from the Q&A portion of the event (see inserts below).



Saunders sorts through questions for toughest ones (above left) – passes those over to Willis (above right)



Saunders passes tough questions to Willis (above left) – Willis answers tough questions from staff (above right)

The case for Saunders' inability to handle the problems being faced by USM (since 2007) is an easy one to make. Her prior experiences, as an administrator at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, Columbus State University, and the University of West Florida, were nothing like what's she has faced at USM. None of these other institutions is what people would think of in their home states as a major public research institution. Thus, this is Saunders' first post at an institution even close to the caliber of USM on the research front. Also, not one of these prior

schools hosts division 1 football, a situation that almost immeasurably complicates matters for a university leader. The last time Saunders was with an institution on the scale of USM in terms of research, academics, sports, etc., was when she was a graduate student in communications, and then, of course, she did not gain any experience as a university executive.

A case for Willis serving as USM's "shadow president" is also a relatively easy one to make. Willis has been around USM for a relatively long time. As such, he has seen a lot the goings on throughout the corridors of USM's central administration building (and beyond). The fact that he is accumulating titles under Saunders – director of human resources, chief financial officer, and vice president for administrative affairs – suggests that these past experiences make his presence nearby Saunders, particularly during crises of one sort or another, an absolute necessity. Lastly, Willis' legal training (he has a J.D.) also comes in handy when dealing with the types of issues that arise at USM, while Saunders' training is more about shaping an institution's *image*.

The question at the top of this report is sure to roll off of the tongues of many USM faculty in the coming weeks and months. With another \$10 million in budget cuts expected to be dealt with next year, Willis will likely be a busy individual for the foreseeable future.