

President Martha Saunders Under Oath

Are You Listening, Mr. Bounds, Mr. Lucas? Do You Approve?

Part 7

“Don’t count her out yet. There are plenty of low level colleges where she could rise again.”

[*Name withheld*](#)

If there is a chance that Martha Saunders can repeat her incompetence as an administrator at another college or university, its faculty and administrators should have a clear picture of her conduct as president of Southern Miss. This series provides a rare opportunity for the Southern Miss family, as well as potential employers, to consider Martha Saunders’ words, under oath. Click for [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#), [Part 5](#), and [Part 6](#).

Martha Saunders didn't just squander millions of dollars in student and taxpayer money on an airplane, or hundreds of thousands decorating the Presidential mansion's bedroom, or hundreds of thousands on a misguided, illegal computer tablet give-away scheme, or at least a million in mismanagement on athletics that we know of, etc. She spent approximately two and a half million dollars trying and failing to fire me for opposing and exposing the questionable conduct of USM faculty and administrators.

It’s your money -- your millions and millions of dollars. Taxpayer and students’ money. If you care to understand just how incompetent Martha Saunders is, take a front row seat at her deposition. And where were Hank Bounds and Aubrey Lucas? With millions being spent to try to fire DePree, you can bet they knew. And, you don't have to take anyone's word. Observe it for yourself. Her deposition continues below:

Part 29

Questions directed to President Martha Saunders at her deposition on April 12 and 13, 2010--Q is question; A is President Saunders’ answer.

Q. Have you reviewed Dr. DePree's research?

A. No.

Q. Do you know if he has sufficient refereed publications to meet presumption of academic qualification?

A. I do not. I'm told no.

Q. Who told you no, Dr. Saunders?

A. I've been told by the current dean and the provost.

Q. While Mr. Hooks is looking at that document, do you know how many publications are required for Dr. DePree to be considered prima facie academically qualified?

A. No.

Q. Have you asked how many publications would be required?

A. No.

Q. Have you reviewed Dr. DePree's vitae?

A. No... [Saunders looks at documents] It [USM College of Business AACSB self study] says given the mission of the accounting unit -- it uses as an example, three refereed publications including two journal articles.

Q. Do you know if Dr. Depree has three publi- -- two publications in refereed journals at another refereed proceeding?

A. I don't know.

Q. Have you checked?

A. No.

Q. Have you asked?

A. No.

Keep in mind, President Saunders was the decision-maker to initiate termination proceedings against Professor DePree. Ask yourself what a decision-maker does. Now consider that President Saunders had access to Professor DePree's research record for the relevant period. She could have accessed on her computer the USM research vita for Dr. DePree in a matter of seconds. That search would have identified several publications, two of which are "A" level publications (Publications are listed as A, B, C, and Other, similar to grades.) One paper won an award from the premier professional accounting organization. It was also reprinted in several ethics books and translated into foreign languages and published in a premier international professional accounting journal. Dr. Saunders would also have learned from the College of Business Handbook within ten seconds that the journal ranking system was developed for people just like her:

“Operation of the Journal Ranking Committee

3/25/2008

PURPOSE:

AACSB requires that faculty publish in peer-reviewed journals to maintain disciplinary currency in their respective fields. A journal rankings list enables faculty to identify appropriate

publication outlets that will help them maintain their status as academically qualified for AACSB purposes. Similarly, the new P&T document suggests the need for a journal rankings (henceforth JR) list to guide the P&T process.

Because departments include multiple disciplines, faculty members are often evaluated by someone [*like President Saunders*] who is outside their area of expertise. A J[ournal] R[anking] list would thus be invaluable for a department head seeking a fair and impartial evaluation of a faculty member who is outside his or her area of expertise.

Because the J[ournal] R[anking] list is used for performance evaluations, it also provides guidance for the types of journals that faculty members should target... We define four distinct ranking classes: A, B, C, and O... A and B journals are also peer-reviewed but are evaluated more stringently using acceptance rates, quality of editorial review board, and rankings in journal classification studies...“A” journals are considered top-tier journals for promotion, tenure, and merit evaluations.”

Or, Dr. Saunders could have simply “Googled” *Chauncey M. DePree, Jr.* and she could have found many publications. Identifying the journal in the Journal Ranking list would have given her the School of Accountancy’s peer-reviewed, well-considered views of the relative value of Professor DePree’s publications. What do you think? Is it a task within the capability of any Phd? What about a life-long administrator? What about the president of a “world class” university?

How could President Saunders get away with such a display of ignorance and/or arrogant indifference to facts? The obvious answer is that she is immune from accountability. To paraphrase the legal scholar, Stewart E. Sterkz: Greater immunity from accountability encourages greater misconduct.

Part 30

Q. Dr. Saunders, did you give Dr. Depree any reason for sustaining all evaluations [DePree’s appeals of annual evaluations for the years of 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007]?

A. No.

Q. Did you have reasons?

A. Yes.

Q. What were those reasons?

A. I found no -- no reason to overturn the evaluations.

Q. And what would you require as a reason to overturn an evaluation?

A. On other cases, I would have to – I really can't answer that. There are too many reasons when I might do that to really enumerate them.

Q. What would you look for in terms of determining whether to reverse an evaluation?

A. I would look for anything --

Q. Okay?

A. -- in the appeal or in the process that indicated that the department may have departed from its own policy.

Q. What are the policies of the college of business?

A. I can't say.

Q. That you applied in this case?

A. I can't remember.

Q. Is there anything that would remind you of what you considered?

A. I don't think so.

Q. Dr. Saunders, did you review the college of business faculty handbook?

A. No.

Q. Prior to making a decision?

A. No.

Q. And what would the college of business faculty handbook likely tell you?

A. That would include college standards.

Q. And did you look at those college standards?

A. No.

Q. Did you discuss with anyone the college standards?

A. No.

Q. Is it unusual to have four years of grievances backed up for a single faculty?

A. I don't know.

Q. Have you seen four years of evaluations that have not been --

A. No.

Q. -- processed during your tenure?

A. No...

Q. Dr. Saunders, by your failure to act on the 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 grievances from June 2007 until December 8, 2008, did you allow Dr. Depree's grievances to languish?

A. I don't think so.

Q. And why do you believe you did not?

A. Well, for a couple of reasons. I inherited the appeals.

So, if a Saunders "inherits" appeals, she can take years to answer them. That makes about as much sense as the rest of her testimony. Dr. Saunders found no reason to overturn the lower level decisions (some of which had been decided in Professor DePree's favor, but she did not know that because she had not read them) but she did not review the CoB Faculty handbook so that she would understand the standards she was to apply. Let's review this to make sure we understand Dr. Saunders. When she was asked, "What would you look for in terms of determining whether to reverse an evaluation?" she answered, "I would look for anything in the appeal or in the process that indicated that the department may have departed from its own policy." But when asked if she read the department's "own policy" to be able to understand the standard she'd apply, she answered, "No."

Saunders had five years of grievances for more than a year. It never occurred to her that the delays were *per se* an abuse of process. She was dealing with highly unusual events—even according to her own testimony—and she has no idea why she decided against the appeals. Unusual events are remembered events, if you're being honest. By the way, the annual evaluations were written by several administrators who petitioned the president to fire Professor DePree. Do you think it is possible (even likely) that their evaluations were motivated by bias? What would it have taken to raise a red flag for Saunders?

Part 31

Q. You indicated that you had carefully reviewed Dr. Cannon's [Ombudsman's] report; is that correct?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you recall Dr. Cannon stating that after a number of opinion reversals [with regard to Dr. DePree's appeals of annual evaluations] by administrators and two committees and what appears

to me to be an excessively long time [from 2003 to 2007], the original evaluation was upheld. Do you recall that?

A. No.

Q. Would you look at Dr. Cannon's?

A. Certainly.

Q. I believe it's an exhibit to your deposition.

A. (Witness looks at document.) Okay. I see that.

Q. Did it trouble you upon reviewing Dr. Cannon's report the number of opinion reversals?

A. I can't remember that it did or did not.

Q. But Dr. Cannon told you it did?...Dr. Saunders, does it trouble you now as you read Dr. Cannon's report that there were administrative reversals?

A. It strikes me curious.

Q. Would that impact your review of the grievances had you known of the reversals?

A. I don't think so.

Q. Does it concern you that Dr. Cannon was of the opinion that the evaluations took an excessively long time?

A. It would.

Q. Would that impact your decision on the appeals?

A. No.

Q. Have you discussed Dr. Cannon's concern with either the provost or the dean?

A. I don't know. I don't recall.

Q. Do you know if anything has been done to rectify the situation?

A. Which situation?

Q. The excessively long delays referenced by Dr. Cannon?

A. I don't know.

Q. Dr. Cannon, I believe, also stated that: Although his -- Dr. Depree's -- scholarly activities have not changed since 2003, his evaluation scores have varied from 0.5 in 2004 to 2.0 in 2005. I strongly recommend that SAIS find some means of standardizing the evaluation process. Is that what he said?

A. Yes.

Q. Does it concern you that even though Dr. Depree's scholarly activities had not changed his evaluations changed suggesting that, perhaps, unitary standards were not followed, for example?

A. Again, it seems -- it makes me curious.

Q. What are you going to do about your curiosity?

A. I have directed the provost -- directed Provost Middlebrooks, Interim Provost Middlebrooks and now Provost Lineman to insure on an annual basis that department standards are clear. We are spending a lot of time. When I first came here, we spent more time. Now I think there is more clarity. Because when I review a tenure decision, I need a good understanding of where the department is coming from, and not just the college of business. As a matter of fact, the college of business has clearer standards than many because of AACSB expectations.

Q. Did you review those standards of the college of business before you conducted -- before you reviewed these appeals?

A. I don't remember. I don't think so.

Q. You don't think so?

A. I don't remember.

Q. Do you recall anything about these grievances?

A. Not -- very.

Q. All right. And what do you recall?

A. Very little.

Q. Do you recall anything?

BY MS. JUDE: Q. What very little do you recall?

A. I recall that there was a great deal of back and forth, a request on Dr. Depree's part for clarifications, and that's what stands out in my mind.

Q. And do you recall if clarifications were provided?

A. I don't.

Q. You don't recall?

A. I don't recall.

Q. Do you recall any issues of fact relating to the evaluations?

A. No.

Q. For example, with respect to 2007, do you recall Dr. Jackson in his evaluation saying that Dr. Depree had no publications in refereed journals?

A. No.

Q. Do you know if Dr. Depree had publications in a refereed journal during that period?

A. No.

Q. If he had a publication and Dr. Jackson said he did not, would that make a difference in your evaluation? [There were several including two A publications—ranked by School of Accounting and College of Business Journal Ranking list which were include in the appeals and in the possession of Dr Saunders.]

THE WITNESS: It may.

BY MS. JUDE: Q. Under what circumstances would it make a difference?

THE WITNESS: It would depend on the journal.

BY MS. JUDE: Q. And if it was an A-level publication, what would that mean to you?

A. If it were an A-level publication identified by the college of business, it would mean that he had a publication.

Q. A good publication?

THE WITNESS: It should be.

BY MS. JUDE: Q. It should be a good publication?

A. It should be.

Q. And it would not be treated as being unsatisfactory?

THE WITNESS: Well, I don't know that I could answer it if I saw the publication. Those are determinations that the college makes the quality, the types of publications, it's not unusual for there to be differences even within a department or a college. I'll use another college as an example: We recently had some discussions about pedagogical literature versus basic research. There is a strong feeling in some departments that pedagogical literature is not substantial, so that's an example, and I would not be able to make that determination. Those come from the department.

BY MS. JUDE: Q. Does the college of business have a journal ranking system?

A. I don't know.

Q. Would you look at the faculty handbook for the college of business?

A. Just a minute (looks at document). There is in appendix A2 college of business journal rankings will be revised periodically. The current ranking of the journal appears in this attachment, so there is an attachment.

Q. What is the purpose of the journal ranking?

A. Well, it rates the journals themselves based on prestige, I'd say.

Q. And the more prestigious the higher the rating?

A. I would assume so, of course.

Q. Is that what the college of business faculty handbook says?

A. Yes.

In fact, the stated purpose of the Journal Ranking in the College of Business is to facilitate review by people outside the College of Business and its departments -- people like President Saunders. As you read the following CoB policy, bear in mind that Professor DePree has more A and B publications than any other accounting faculty in the history of the College of Business, University of Southern Mississippi, and that during the period of appeal of annual evaluations, he had many A and B publications. Under any published standard, his research does not merit a research score of unsatisfactory – unless the goal is to punish him for his speech. In fact, the CoB Faculty Handbook states that an A level publication merits an evaluation of 4 out of a possible 5 on the annual evaluation score, an excellent score.

President Saunders had all of this information. If, as she claims, Dr. Saunders carefully considered the 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007 annual evaluations and appeals, read the CoB rules, she would have known what she read and been able to testify about her careful reading.

Saunders swore under oath that she read and considered the documents “carefully,” but when asked about their contents, she remembered nothing. What is the truth, Dr. Saunders?

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3/25/2008

PURPOSE:

AACSB requires that faculty publish in peer-reviewed journals to maintain disciplinary currency in their respective fields. A journal rankings list enables faculty to identify appropriate publication outlets that will help them maintain their status as academically qualified for AACSB purposes. Similarly, the new P&T document suggests the need for a journal rankings (henceforth JR) list to guide the P&T process.

Because departments include multiple disciplines, faculty members are often evaluated by someone who is outside their area of expertise. A JR list would thus be invaluable for a department head seeking a fair and impartial evaluation of a faculty member who is outside his or her area of expertise. (Emphasis added.)

Because the JR list is used for performance evaluations, it also provides guidance for the types of journals that faculty members should target.¹

RANKING CRITERIA:

We define four distinct ranking classes: A, B, C, and O...

To be ranked as an A, B, or C, a journal must be *credibly* peer-reviewed. The “credible peer review” criterion appears to be reasonable to the extent that it is the primary AACSB criterion when evaluating AQ status of faculty.

Indeed, if an article counts toward a faculty member maintaining his/her AQ status for AACSB, then it should also count (at least) as a C in our ranking...A and B journals are also peer-reviewed but are evaluated more stringently using acceptance rates, quality of editorial review board, and rankings in journal classification studies. B journals would need to be clearly better than C journals in these criteria and A journals would need to be clearly superior to B journals. “A” journals are considered top-tier journals for promotion, tenure, and merit evaluations. “B” journals are highly respected journals in their disciplines. C journals are peer-reviewed journals that are recognized in their respective disciplines. “O” journals are non-peer reviewed journals and “U” are those that have not been evaluated and ranked.

¹ As Yogi Berra once said "If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else."

COLLEGE-WIDE RANKING:

The study of business is by its very nature multi-disciplinary and there should be no disincentive to engaging in cross-disciplinary and collaborative research. A college-wide list constitutes a first step towards acknowledging the overlapping nature of the various disciplines.

Because of overlaps, the move to a college-wide list brings up the issue of logical consistency, which, in turn, brings up the issue of ownership.

CONSISTENCY:

Suppose that Economics faculty wished to rank the National Tax Journal (NTJ) as a B, whereas Accounting faculty were to consider it an A. Then consistency (if not fairness) would require both groups to come to an agreement and rank the NTJ at the same level, either as an A or a B.

OWNERSHIP:

1. All journals from all disciplines are listed in a single spreadsheet and are generally only listed once. Each journal is associated with one discipline, which will be awarded ownership over that journal and will be responsible for requesting changes as the journal gains or loses prestige and influence in the future. There may be some very rare exceptions, where a journal is cross-listed in multiple disciplines (e.g., *Journal of Business Finance and Accounting*, which is listed under both Accounting and Finance.)

Truly multi-disciplinary journals fall under the “General Business” moniker and are not associated with a particular department.

2. When a faculty member publishes in a journal outside his or her discipline, the in-discipline rank should apply. For example, if a marketing faculty member publishes in an accounting journal ranked as a “B” by accountants, then it will be viewed as a “B” for merit and P&T evaluation purposes.

PROCEDURE:

According to the new P&T document, “there are sufficient differences across academic disciplines within the College of Business such that journal rankings and classifications should be determined at the department level.”

1. Faculty members within each discipline rank their journals and submit their lists to the JR Committee. The proposed ranking must be supported by external evidence, such as published and refereed ranking studies and existing rankings at reputable universities. Each department organizes the information in an EXCEL spreadsheet with the following columns: JOURNAL NAME, DEPT_RANK, RANK1, RANK2, RANK3, where DEPT_RANK is the rank assigned by the department and RANK1 is the ranking according to, say, a ranking study, RANK2 is the ranking assigned by, say, U. of Michigan, and so forth. *These are required to*

support and validate the departmental ranking efforts. The departmental journal rankings are then submitted to the JR Committee for individual vote and approval.

2. Journals that are truly cross-disciplinary (ownership = “general” e.g., Journal of Business Research) will be researched jointly by the JR Committee.

CREDIBILITY:

The journal list for the College of Business at USM should be credible and respectable when viewed by the academic community from the College’s respective disciplines. The final and approved CoB-wide ranking should be openly posted on the CoB website as a commitment device for the JR Committee and as an additional signal of credibility.”