

Operation: Research Rewind Part 1

It's the mid- to late-1980s in the College of Business Administration at the University of Southern Mississippi. With former Dean Joseph Greene's retirement and subsequent replacement by Ty Black, the vision for the CBA was one filled with research and an improved regional and national image.

The CBA had a core of faculty that were relatively young. Alvin Williams had returned from Arkansas and had been tenured by Greene. Rod Posey had been sent off to Oklahoma State and had returned. Charles Sawyer had been relatively recently hired. There were older faculty who had some research prowess. What the CBA lacked, however, was a group of sparkplugs – individuals who were driven to do more and better research, the kind that gets a college noticed. It was at this juncture that several crucial hires were made. It was this hiring cycle that has defined the CBA/CBED/CoB up until the present. Some of these hires were successful, while some were not. Some of the successful hires have turned out to be among the worst decisions ever made by business school administrators. Some of the unsuccessful hires were unsuccessful only because of business school administrators.

This is the story of two individuals wrapped up in one such hire.

The year was 1989-1990. James Thomas "Tom" Lindley and Sharon Topping were hired as Professor of Finance and Assistant Professor of Management, respectively. Lindley and Topping were (and still are) married and had previously been on faculty at the University of Alabama – Tuscaloosa together. Topping had arrived in Tuscaloosa ABD from Florida State University and had failed to complete her dissertation in the time allotted by Alabama officials. Topping and Lindley were married, and she completed a Ph.D. from the University of Alabama – Birmingham. Now they needed a school that would allow them to work together. USM presented itself.

Lindley had established himself as a researcher, publishing articles in premier academic journals in his field and building a portfolio of publications that established him as a true scholar. Lindley worked on research seven days a week. He was outspoken, but he was the sparkplug that the finance group needed to jumpstart its research and immediately give the department a head start on AACSB legitimacy with respect to publication. Topping, the trailing spouse, was no slouch in her own right. Her budding research in health care management was showing signs of eminence, and her grant writing capabilities were developing formidably. They were a power couple in the CBA.

Black hired Lindley and Topping around the time Eric Reidenbach, David Hunt, and Marc DePree were added to the CBA. Along with Don Robin in Marketing, these Sparkplugs were supposed to crank up the profile of the CBA and make it the preeminent business school in the state of Mississippi.

Exactly what happened to Black isn't widely known for certain. Some suggest that members of the CBA faculty had some knowledge with which they blackmailed Black into making changes. Others suggest that the Sparkplugs became too difficult for Black to control, demanding more research support and better raises and siphoning money from the slop trough frequented by the CBA's resource hogs, the faculty who had been sucking up (pun intended) resources for years. Still others suggest that Black faced a widespread mutiny of faculty hired pre-1988 if he allowed the research requirements in the CBA to be ramped up, as those faculty members did not have the skills necessary to do quality research or feel the need to continue with the "research farce" played by the CBA between 1984 and 1994. What we do know is that sometime between 1992 and 1995, Black turned on the scholars he had recruited and began showing huge favoritism to older colleagues. Black began to withdraw research funding. Professorships that had been promised as part of hiring agreements vanished or were reassigned.

Robin and Reidenbach left USM, as did Hunt. They left USM for more research-friendly turf in academics or consulting. Lindley and DePree, however, would not be moved. With Topping on the verge of tenure and promotion and with the difficulty of finding a two-vacancy situation, his career was set at USM. Unable to get Lindley, who had come to USM as a Full Professor and with tenure, out, Black did the outrageous: he targeted Topping. At nearly the same time that Black and George Carter, then chair of Economics and International Business, were attempting to railroad Trellis Green, Black and Stephen Bushardt, then chair of the Management Department, maneuvered to eliminate Sharon Topping via a negative tenure decision. Bushardt and Black orchestrated activities to devalue Topping's professional achievements. They declared Topping's research inadequate and refused to recognize her accepted articles, stating that articles not in print did not count toward tenure and promotion. Bushardt and Black questioned the legitimacy of Topping's progress in her grant work, to which Topping provided documentation from the National Institutes of Mental Health that proclaimed her success. Black took every step possible to ruin Topping's career at USM in an effort to drive both her and Lindley out of the CBA. Topping prepared to litigate.

However, Black and his cadre lost this gambit. Trellis Green's lawsuit settled several such instances in the CBA, and Topping's case was one of those settled. Topping received her just due in the end and today is a tenured Full Professor of Management. Soon thereafter, Black, Carter, and Bushardt stepped down from their administrative positions, though the exact details of the settlements are sealed.

Whether forced or willing, Black's attempt to rewind the CBA's research progress was successful. With Robin and Reidenbach gone, Marketing and Management fell back into line with a more traditional approach. Quantities of low-level research supplanted higher-level manuscripts in the reward system. Targeting A and B level journals was replaced by targeting journals that hardly issue a rejection letter.

What Black's cadre didn't count on was that several other hires made during the Sparkplug era would make it difficult to completely roll back the research culture in the CBA – there would still be those who insisted that quality was more important than

quantity with respect to research. That is why today, in 2007, the CoB is facing the end of the rollback started so many years ago by Black, Carter, Bushardt, Niroomand, and others, notably some senior accountants. With resources at an all-time low and administrative waste at an all-time high, the CoB is in crisis. As Stephen Bushardt lobbied for separate departmental evaluation processes, the last vestige of research culture in the CoB expired – it breathed its last. The research rewind is nearly over. Once the rewind stops, the only question will be “How do we get the tape to go forward again?” Unfortunately for the CBA that was, the CoB that is may be the lasting situation of the future.