

Industry Experience

There are so many ways he has been an asset. He was able to take an academic environment and turn it into something practical for business.

-- Coca Cola's Brad Brian on
Shelby Thames' USM Presidency

One of the requirements for new hires under the Thames administration – and one that has been adopted by the Doty Administration with relish – is the requirement that candidates for faculty positions possess “Industry Experience.”

On the surface, this requirement sounds great, especially to the business community that is associated with USM. Requiring Industry Experience implies that USM's faculty will somehow be better able to communicate the application of their respective fields; of course, this assumes that teaching applications is more important than teaching the underpinnings of a field. Of course, this is the type of disastrous decision that has led Mississippi higher education to its present state – one of awarding credentials rather than actually educating. Under this model (i.e., requiring Industry Experience), Mississippi higher education, and USM in particular, is being turned into a glorified trade school system to jumpstart the magical economic development engine, and it's all a disaster waiting to happen.

On a deeper level, the Industry Experience requirement, and its support in the local community, is a prejudiced backlash against real academics. Real academics question everything and are not persuaded by appeals to tradition (“We've always done it this way.”) or good-ole-boy politics (e.g., practicing nepotism and favor trading). What a portion of the USM-supporting business community really wants is a faculty that will assist them in getting a better workforce at a cheaper price and in getting pork barrel money whenever available, things real academics probably wouldn't spend 1 minute aiding and abetting. These types of activities aren't good for Mississippi, and they're not good for USM students. Nobody is suggesting that USM shouldn't serve the needs of Mississippians; the question is: Why should USM be providing free business consulting to a select coalition of Hattiesburg merchants?

Industry Experience has recently been used in an attempt to derail the hiring of a Director for the Center for Economics Education at USM. The CEE is Doty's pet project, yet to reach this goal of having such a center (and the employment for his spouse), Doty will have to give EFIB – his least favorite department – another faculty line. The DCEE would supposedly design, implement, and oversee teacher training programs in economic education and financial education – like holding seminars to teach Mississippi schoolteachers how to teach economics and personal finance issues to high school students. Doty trotted some of the DCEE candidates out for a “meet and greet” with Doty's local business supporters. After the meeting(s), these businesspeople rejected the candidates because of a “lack of Industry Experience.” In short, these candidates wouldn't be able to help local businesses write grants and get contracts – two functions completely unrelated to the duties of the Director of the Center for Economics Education.

By allowing this tangentially related constituency to invoke the “lack of Industry Experience” issue, Doty is effectively allowing the Hattiesburg business community to hijack an economics education initiative, probably because it will mean added support for his deanship, even if it’s not the right thing to do. That’s par for the course. Recently, however, it appears that an alternative route has emerged. After the “Industry Experience” invocation, Doty has suggested that a management/entrepreneurship hire be made for the DCEE. Way to go, Harold! Hire a management person to teach economics. Maybe you can hire a professor of history to be the chair of the accounting department while you’re at it.

Finally, on a more manipulative and sinister note, requiring Industry Experience narrows the potential candidate pool in favor of the self-serving, chain-of-command dictatorships that run USM. Industry Experience is really a proxy factor for “willingness to follow orders.” Anecdotally – and most especially in the case of USM – faculty members with Industry Experience are much more likely to follow orders handed down by administrators, just as workers in non-union factories are apt to follow the supervisor’s orders without question. Thus, requiring Industry Experience improves the odds that the eventual hire will be someone who will be a “go along to get along” kind of person, which is exactly what the Dotys, Niroomands, Babins, Carters, etc., of the world want. Don’t question administrative decisions. Don’t question whether something is good for CoB/USM students. Don’t ask questions about how taxpayer money is spent/wasted. Just do what you’re told and keep quiet. After all, it’s not your place to ask anything of anyone; you just ought to be happy to have a job. Industry Experience: USM code for “our kind of guy/girl.”

Any way you slice it, too much reliance on Industry Experience as an employment requirement for academics is a bad thing. It leads to substandard outcomes and wasting of taxpayer money. Unfortunately, however, it makes it easier for administrators to create colleges of automatons, so Industry Experience will continue to be abused by the Harold Dotys of the USM world.