

Rest for the Weary

A Closer Look at Russ Willis' Resignation as Vice President for Administrative Affairs

A Guest Column from C. Anna Hall

The ink on Russ Willis' Jan-2012 resignation as vice president for administrative affairs at USM is still drying, and was on 27-Jan-2012 when USM faculty senate president Timothy Rehner addressed the matter to open the senate's monthly meeting. Rehner stated:

"Well, there's been a few things happen since we met last. Let me tell you a little bit about what I've been able to piece together . . . The latest thing was the resignation of the VP for administrative affairs, Russ Willis. I think his . . . that notice went out Tuesday [24-Jan-2012], maybe, of this week, and, from what I can tell, it does not appear as though there was anything related to performance or conflict at any level. If anything, there's a whole bunch of sad persons that he was stepping down. And I think it was a decision that was good for Russ, and he's still going to be in the [USM] Foundation, and I think it's going to be a position that's not going to have as much stress connected to it."

Rehner gave this report because he felt it was good to quell any rumors about Willis' departure being related to some sort of malfeasance. Still, however, Rehner alluded to the lack of a heads-up from the Martha Saunders administration regarding Willis' resignation as yet another example of how faculty governance at the 100-year old institution appears to be diminishing.



Steve Oshrin

At this point early in the meeting, another faculty senator, Steve Oshrin, chimed in with additional information on the Willis resignation. According to Oshrin, a conversation with USM EEOC director Becky Woodrick supported Rehner's account of the Willis resignation. According to Oshrin's account of what he was told by Woodrick,

" . . . essentially Russ [Willis] is a workaholic, and he was putting in 12 hour days [as USM CFO] before he took the [VPAAA] job, and he ended up putting in 14 or 16 hour days [after accepting the VPAA position], and it just wore him out. He couldn't do it. He stepped down just for that reason – he couldn't do it."

Effective 1-Feb-2012, Willis holds a fundraising post in the USM Foundation. The job he surrendered – that of USM VPAA – was a newly-created position in the Saunders administration that paid Willis \$185,000 per year. At the time of his resignation, Willis had held the VPAA post on a permanent basis for only about six months. Sources tell USMNEWS.net that Willis now likely earns a salary in the \$120,000-\$150,000 range, figures that would equate to a drop in salary anywhere from 18.9% to 35.1%, a whopping cut if accurate.

All of the details presented above raise more questions than answers regarding Willis' resignation as USM VPAA. For one, why do USM faculty senators and USM faculty senate presidents run to USM administrators for answers to questions about the actions of those in the USM administration? Remember, just days before the media informed the USM community that former USM provost Robert Lyman was involved in the \$400,000 Tabletgate scandal – a discovery that resulted in Lyman being put on administrative leave by the IHL – Saunders told the public that Lyman was resigning his provost position for “personal reasons.” Saunders' explanation was unacceptable then, and remains so now.



Rebecca Woodrick

At issue also is Woodrick's response. According to Woodrick, Willis is a workaholic. Below is information on the term “workaholic” from dictionary.com:

workaholic

— *n*

- a. a person obsessively addicted to work
- b. (*as modifier*): *workaholic behaviour*

Woodrick's characterization of Willis as a workaholic would better explain why Willis would want to move from the USM CFO position, one whose tasks apparently required 12 hours each day, to the USM VPAA position, one whose tasks apparently required 14 hours per day. This is particularly true when one considers that Willis' salary rose by \$65,000 per year (54%) in the process of moving from CFO to VPAA. Instead, the USM community is told that the workaholic wanted to relinquish the VPAA post for the much-less-stressful new fundraising position in the USMF, even though such a move could cost Willis 20% of his salary, if not much more.

What could be so stressful about being USM VPAA? Willis told the USM community that the crux of the position is oversight of the construction projects ongoing around the USM campuses. The position of VPAA also appears to have been created just for Willis – he has been the only occupant of that post since Saunders created it in late 2010. Why would she create such a back-breaking job for Willis, her most relied-upon lieutenant?

Assuming the VPAA post is as back-breaking and demoralizing as Woodrick describes, why would Saunders continue to beg Willis to hang on to the position, in fact lengthening his stay in that capacity with the central administration more than Willis desired? That is the picture painted for the USM

faculty senate by Oshrin. What are we to make now of Saunders' concern for the welfare of her subordinates? What about rank-and-file faculty at USM? Again, the more officials at USM speak about Willis' mysterious departure, the more questions many have.