

## Same Song, Second Verse Second Verse Same as the First?

Here we go again. RETENTION is the magic administrative buzzword. Since Dr. Rodney Bennett's [arrival](#) he held out the word as if it were a magic talisman against the evils of budget cuts. On [19-Aug-2013](#), *The Hattiesburg American's* presser reported Bennett's first student convocation and "... the emphasis is unmistakably clear. Retention. Progression. Graduation."

It's not the first time we have heard about retention. Let's go back to April-2009 when former President Martha Saunders created the position of assistant provost for student success -- a position still occupied by Brent Kemker, the inaugural holder of the post. At the time of his appointment, [Dr. Kemker explained](#) "My role in the provost's office will be facilitating university support for our students and their successful graduation." So, what has Kemker accomplished? Apparently very little.

On 2-Sept-2011, during a USM faculty senate meeting, [Saunders was asked](#) "How are we doing on retention? A lot of effort has been spent there." Saunders' answer? "We won't have these numbers for a few weeks. I don't think it's real good news. I'm not sure all of these efforts are paying off." Two more years have passed since Saunders' acknowledgement of *her* failed efforts; yet, as stated by [THA](#) "That [course completion] has been a challenge in the past for the university. Southern Miss has the third-highest graduation rate of any public university in the state, but still lags far behind Ole Miss and Mississippi State." In fact, the [graduation rate](#) (the ultimate retention statistic) for Southern Miss is abysmal: 4-Year Graduation Rate: 22% and 6-Year Graduation Rate: 47%

In addition to more [financial bloat](#) -- the usual USM presidential solution to all problems --, [Dr. Bennett announced](#) -- what many characterize as a huge vote of no-confidence in the faculty -- a "new early notification pilot program that faculty members will roll out this year, which will make them more vigilant in approaching students in their classes who are struggling academically. That very hands-on, personal, one-on-one is just what the doctor ordered," Bennett said. 'It could make all the difference in the world in getting a student re-centered and back on track, (as opposed to) having a student stay on the path they're on, which will ultimately lead to a failing grade or withdrawal from the course and leaving the university.'"

Faculty sources are complaining, "Does he [Dr. Bennett] really think so little of us [the faculty] that he believes we need a "program" to know which of our students are struggling? Does he really think so little of us [the faculty] that he believes we do not reach out to help our students?"

Others echo a sentiment presented in an [11-Apr-2013](#) usmnews.net editorial "Do you have the feeling you have just been strong-armed to give grades -- note the key word "give" -- that will retain students and "creat[e] pathways" for their graduation?"