

Saunders Admits to Failing Retention Efforts

MISSISSIPPI TAX DOLLARS GETTING LITTLE RETURN

Q: How are we doing on retention? A lot of effort has been spent there.

The question you see just above was put to USM president Martha Saunders during the Q&A session at the 2-Sept-2011 USM faculty senate meeting. Saunders' answer was quite remarkable:

A: 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.

Given the budget problems that USM faculty have faced since the summer of 2009, this answer was not welcomed news to faculty senators. Saunders pointed out that new freshmen are up 8%, while new transfers are up 5%. Yet, the student body as a whole is up only 4%. These numbers suggest a retention problem like the one Saunders has now admitted to. She went further on 2-Sept-2011, telling faculty senators that there now appears to be a problem with "junior retention," meaning that a number of rising USM seniors are simply not returning to school to complete their degree programs. Lastly, the USM president admitted that overall graduate enrollment is not growing at all, a situation that she stated is not at all understandable in light of the dismal economic situation being faced all over the United States. To this comment, USM provost Robert Lyman interjected, reminding Saunders that six (6) master's programs had been eliminated over the past year or so. Saunders retorted by suggesting to Lyman that these were cut due to low enrollments, and therefore could not be at the root of the graduate level enrollment problem. Lyman then closed the mini-dispute by pointing out to Saunders that these programs had around 60 enrollees combined, representing a non-trivial sum.



Brett Kemker

What may (or may not) have been lost on some faculty senators in attendance on 2-Sept-2011 is that at the end of 2008-09 Saunders created the position of *assistant provost for student success* – a position still occupied by Brett Kemker, the inaugural holder of this new post. The USM APSS is tasked with improving retention across the board at USM, and thus represents a major component of the "effort" being expended by USM for what appears to be little-to-no reward. As such, Kemker's title and compensation package appear to represent yet another example of the [administrative bloat](#) that continues to hamper the academic mission at USM.