

Special Report

'IMPEACH'

USM's New Retention Rewards Program

In what USMNEWS.net sources [are referring to as](#) USM's surprise Incentive Model for Promoting Efforts to Advance Credit Hours ([IMPEACH](#)), the Martha Saunders administration is now using a line item in the USM budget to reward student retention successes at the department level at USM. However, during USM provost Robert Lyman's Q&A portion of the 5-Nov-2010 USM faculty senate meeting, a number of senators expressed concerns to Lyman about USM's new retention rewards program, wherein USM's central administration has put forward a \$100,000 pool to reward academic departments that (1) produce high retention rates relative to other departments on the campus, and/or (2) produce high retention rates relative to past retention rates for that particular department. One senator (Senator A) opened the discussion by reading a portion of "a note" he sent to CoAL dean [Denise von Herrmann](#) on 4-Nov-2010. The text of that reading is:

"... First, such ideas need to be fully vetted. This one was not, and seems to be the product of someone who is out of touch with the faculty. Second, it's a 'morale killer.' At this time, in this climate, to be devoting \$100,000 to anything other than shoring up bleeding budgets is unwise. If the object is to enhance morale, my concern is that it will have the opposite effect."

The third point in Senator A's note to von Herrmann is, as he told Lyman and the other faculty senators, about the data that are being used to determine these so-called retention rewards. According to Senator A, the data that have already been used to provide the first round of financial rewards "counted [recent USM] graduates as students who had 'failed to return.'" As such, a department is ranked low when it *fails to retain its graduating seniors*. Senator A pointed out that, after graduating 41% of all majors in the program last year, its first-round retention rate looked "abysmal," when in fact it was *not*. After properly accounting for graduates, Senator A stated that his department had either the best or second-best retention rate in the CoAL. Senator A then requested that Lyman put some "smart people" on the task of checking the data that are being used to establish the list of recipients of the new retention rewards.



Lyman von Herrmann

Lyman responded to Senator A by stating that he believed [Michelle Arrington](#) was responsible for the data. According sources, this is yet another example of the willingness of the current cadre of USM administrators to shove underlings "under the bus" when it suits the political desires of those same administrators. Lyman observed

the data being used, and remarked that the numbers “look low,” indicating that graduations were not likely accounted for, though they should have been. Without coming down on one side or the other vis-à-vis the morale aspect of the new rewards program, Lyman stated that the new program “certainly has got people talking about retention.”

After a bit more discussion between Lyman and Senator A, another senator (Senator B) stated:

“. . . [i]f your goal is to incentivize, then let’s use this money as an incentive. To make it an incentive, you have to first announce this competition in advance, so that people know they’re competing for something, and that they . . .”

At this point Senator B was interrupted by Lyman, who, in what seemed to sources to be a fit of irritation, stated:

“Consider *this* the announcement, then.”

Sources tell USMNEWS.net that Senator B is clearly correct in his analysis, and that Lyman’s flippant, sarcastic remark was simply an admission of that. Senator B went on to state,

“. . . this money just comes ‘out of the blue,’ and so what you’re doing is rewarding [academic] programs that happen to stumble into high levels of retention, often not because of things they did, but because of the nature of those [academic] programs – they’re small [academic] programs, or they have lots of stipends attached to them, and you’re not improving quality in any way, shape, or form . . . you’re giving money to [academic] programs that have already succeeded in this area. . . I’m all for competition, but this is a poorly designed [rewards] program.”

After supportive comments from a third senator (Senator C), and fourth (Senator D) chimed in with,

“This data set is totally faulty. If you’re going to reward retention, you have to take out of the calculation *graduates*. We went from 92.3 [percent retention] to 35.3 [percent retention] because we graduated 10 students. That takes us completely out of any contention [for part of the \$100,000] at all, because we were successful, and we graduated students . . .”

At this point Senator B rejoined the discussion by stating,

“I guess what all of these complaints seem to have in common, no matter where you stand, is that, how is it that we’re spending these large amounts of money, and in my mind kind of . . . squandering this money, because it clearly hasn’t been thought out? . . . These are basic issues with the numbers . . . That is a major breakdown in the running of this university, and this is where the morale factor is here.

At this point, Senator B concluded by stating that the new retention rewards program is yet another example of USM making decisions without consulting people or thinking

things through and doing due diligence. He questioned how USM administrators have the faculty's interests in mind when managing the institution in such a disappointing way.

In closing, another related discussion occurred later in the same faculty senate meeting. At this point, a fifth senator (Senator E) asked Lyman and/or USM human resources director/chief financial officer, Russ Willis, if the \$500,000 grant awarded to student affairs for retention efforts - a grant awarded to the faculty senate by USM president Martha Saunders at its Oct-2010 meeting, (1) came from outside the university, and (2) was used to fund the \$100,000 retention rewards program. Lyman answered that the grant came from outside USM, but that he did not know the source of the retention rewards funds, though both Lyman and Senator E stated that it "seems logical" that the grant is the source of the retention rewards. At this moment, however, Willis [took the microphone](#) to say that the \$100,000 did *not* come from the grant, but instead from USM's "unallocated reserves" fund. To this Senator D stated, "I would've felt better if you'd have answered the opposite." He, and perhaps other faculty senators, were also likely wondering, at least according to sources, how much is in the so-called unallocated reserves fund and why that fund isn't being used to more directly address the [dismal fiscal situation](#) USM finds itself in today.