

Special Report

Still Think 'Nothing to See' There?

At its recent Mar-2011 meeting, the Mississippi IHL Board approved salary changes for USM's Chad Driskell and Russ Willis. The aforementioned approval came through acceptance of the Feb-2012 meeting minutes. During the Feb-2012 meeting, the IHL voted unanimously to go into "Executive Session," as the Board Book insert below indicates, to discuss "personnel matters at one of the public universities under the Board's purview."

EXECUTIVE SESSION

On motion by Trustee Perry, with Trustees Robinson and Whitten absent and not voting, all Trustees legally present and participating voted unanimously to close the meeting to determine whether or not it should declare an Executive Session. On motion by Trustee Perry, seconded by Trustee Pickering, with Trustees Robinson and Whitten absent and not voting, all Trustees legally present and participating voted unanimously to **go into Executive Session** for the reason reported to the public and stated in these minutes, as follows:

Discussion of four personnel matters at one of the public universities under the Board's purview.

The Mar-2012 Board Book followed with an explanation for the call for executive session. That explanation is inserted below:

During Executive Session, the following matters were discussed and/or voted upon:

The Board discussed four personnel matters at one of the public universities under the Board's purview.

On motion by Trustee Pickering, seconded by Trustee Smith, with Trustees Neely, Robinson, Ross, and Whitten absent and not voting, all Trustees legally present and participating voted unanimously to approve the following personnel change of status items at the University of Southern Mississippi.

- ▶ L. Chad Driskell; *from* Executive Assistant to the President for External Affairs; salary of \$150,000 per annum, pro rata; E&G Funds; *to* Executive Assistant the President for External Affairs and Interim Vice President for Administrative Affairs; no change in salary; effective February 1, 2012
- ▶ Russell Willis; *from* Vice President for Administrative Affairs; salary of \$185,000 per annum, pro rata; E&G Funds; *to* Assistant Director for Fundraising Initiatives and Planned Giving, Office of Advancement; salary of \$80,000 per annum, pro rata; effective February 1, 2012

During the executive session, the IHL approved the Martha Saunders' decision to move Chad Driskell from executive assistant to the president (Saunders) to that particular title *plus* interim vice president for administrative affairs. As long-time readers of USMNEWS.net are aware, [this move came as a result](#) of Russ Willis' decision to resign [as USM's VPAA](#). Although the insert above points out that there was "no change in salary" for Driskell after adding the interim VPAA title to his prior title of EA, many in

the USM community are likely surprised to learn that he was being paid \$150,000 per year as Saunders' *assistant*.

The situation involving Willis is even more amazing. In Aug-2010, Willis had the title interim chief financial officer added to his position as USM's director of human resources. At that time, Willis' salary rose from \$93,450 to \$120,000, representing a 28.4% increase. Later, during the fall of 2010, Saunders changed the interim CFO portion of Willis' dual title to interim VPAA. In February of 2011, Willis was made permanent VPAA by Saunders, and his salary rose to \$185,000 on 1-July-2011. This salary bump represents another 54.2% increase, bringing the total salary change to an astounding 98% in just 11 months.

As a result of this unprecedented math, USMNEWS.net reporters and [columnists were shocked](#) by Willis' decision to give up the VPAA position, even if USM faculty senate Timothy Rehner and faculty senator Steven Oshrin were perfectly comfortable with it (each attempted to allay concerns of other senators at the Jan-2012 faculty senate meeting). One USM columnist predicted that Willis' salary could easily fall to \$120,000, or by a whopping 35.1%, with his move to a fundraising post in the USM Foundation. This prediction missed the mark almost entirely, given that Willis' salary drop took him all the way down to \$80,000 (by Feb-2012) - a 56.8% free fall.



Driskell

Willis

Saunders

Rehner

Oshrin

How can the fact that Willis parted with 56.8% of his VPAA salary, while Driskell's salary remained at \$150,000, *and* that these changes had to be dealt with in an IHL executive session (in Feb-2012), not be related to controversial events that are currently unknown to members of the USM family, including both faculty senators and rank-and-file faculty? Something smells here, at least to USMNEWS.net sources. Changes like those described above are routinely dealt with by the IHL without moving into the shadows of executive session. With Tabletgate and other scandals dogging USM throughout the fall of 2011, more information should be forthcoming about this situation.