

Special Report

True Colors

CoAL Dean Cans Barthelme, Violates Dictum in Doing So

"Get rid of the good, glorify the bad, and recruit the mediocre."

AbbyD, 6-July-2010

In his 6-July-2010 [article](#) for *The Hattiesburg American* entitled "Center loses its director," *THA* higher education reporter Ed Kemp tells the story of how CoAL dean Denise von Herrmann eliminated Frederick Barthelme, director of USM's Center for Writers, and Rie Fortenberry, a CfW administrator. The story of von Herrmann's move has, at the time of this writing, generated so much heat that Kemp's article is accompanied by 45 comments from online followers of the local newspaper. One of these is from "AbbyD," who penned the epigraph above, which she feels characterizes the way USM administrators have historically operated.¹

The story of von Herrmann's treatment of Barthelme, and the nationally renowned CfW, would be a more troubling one if stories like it did not occur so routinely at USM. As Kemp points out, Barthelme is the author of 16 books who has also published in magazines like *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. In 33 years, Barthelme built the CfW into one of the top programs of its kind in the U.S. At the time of his elimination by von Herrmann, he was serving in a non-tenured capacity, after having entered into a phased retirement plan (with the support of former CoAL dean, the late Elliott Pood).

Why cut Barthelme? According to von Herrmann, the CoAL held a series of open meetings, during which it was decided to preserve tenured and tenure-track faculty. So, von Herrmann moved to cut the lines supporting Barthelme and Fortenberry. In doing so, the 2004 PEN/Faulkner Award finalist was sent packing, as was the current editor of the CfW's national publication, *The Mississippi Review*. The CoAL dean's actions also violated USM provost Robert Lyman's dictum in dealing with the \$10 million 2010-11 budget cuts, which was to preserve nationally-renowned programs and faculty. According to Lyman's recent presentations to the USM faculty senate, eliminations/cuts like these were to be avoided; instead, colleges and schools are to look to eliminating other, less productive areas, even if that means eliminating tenured/tenure-track faculty.

¹ The facts in Kemp's article support this characterization, which some in the CoB have attempted to describe on several past occasions. In fact, one CoB management professor is well-known for the phrase *calling s**t gold*, which sources say is a way of describing how CoB administrators build-up the flimsy academic accomplishments of faculty sycophants.

In Lyman's words (to paraphrase), sheltering tenured/tenure-track faculty on an across-the-board basis in some cases shelters unproductive/non-distinctive programs/faculty at the expense of more highly-regarded personnel and programs. Lyman's dictum was followed in the CoB, where five senior, tenured economics faculty were forced into retirement as a result of serving very few student majors. Similar cuts to faculty were made in CoEP.

Going forward, von Herrmann will be operating with much less prestige, at least if the comments in *THA* are any representation. Still, however, members of the USM and Hattiesburg communities are reluctant to connect the dots regarding decisions such as these all the way up to USM president Martha Saunders. Sources tell USMNEWS.net that this reluctance shows just how disastrous the Shelby Thames administration, which preceded Saunders', was for the institution. After the ill-advised decision to lease a Beechcraft King Air airplane, and with more cuts like these over the coming months, some say the hesitation to point a finger at Saunders will likely dissolve.