

A 31st & Pearl Special Series

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A Look at How the CoB is Governed by Exceptions, not Rules

For years former CoB associate dean Farhang Niroomand proclaimed, often defensively, that the CoB could not afford to lose assistant professor of MIS Kuo Lane Chen. To hear Niroomand tell it, Chen's research prowess was too important to the CoB, and without her MIS would look too weak to support an accreditation run. Giving Niroomand the research prowess argument, for the moment at least, begs the question: why would anyone assert Chen was not an asset to the CoB? The answer to that question has been proposed in a number of reports here at USMNEWS.net, especially some very recent ones. That is that very few, from students to staff to faculty colleagues, can understand a word that Chen says. Her communication skills are worse than terrible, and her students have suffered because of it for as long as Niroomand has been defending her research acumen.

Now, in Jan-09, Chen is a tenured associate professor of decision sciences in the CoB. Chen's promotion occurred in 2006-07, her sixth year in the CoB. Her tenure came the next year, 2007-08, during a rare "7th Year Review" that began after then-USM provost Jay Grimes, in the spring of 2007, remanded Chen's 6th Year Review application back to the CoB's Advisory Committee. There it was decided that Chen was to complete an intensive English (as a foreign language) program during the summer of 2007 through USM's ELI. But as the 2007-08 academic year progressed from August, some faculty began to wonder whether Chen had completed that program. Her communication skills had, if anything, deteriorated since Grimes' remand.

The SAIS' Donna Davis and Steven Jackson reportedly decided, during Chen's 2007-08 7th Year Review, that it was time for Chen to part ways with USM's business school. By then, various reports at USMNEWS.net had already begun to expose Niroomand's past praise of Chen's research record as some sort of promotion ploy. Chen's record was nowhere near that of others in MIS. However, by the time Chen was tenured (spring 2008), Niroomand no longer occupied a place in CoB administration. (Heck, even he was spotted berating Chen in a Greene Hall corridor by the fall of 2007. Apparently she needed more support for something, only Niroomand was no longer on Team Chen.) Chen's tenure support came from then-interim CoB dean Alvin Williams, and USM president

Martha Saunders. According to some, both had endured too many scandals by then to oppose a shaky tenure decision.

All of this brings us to now. Chen's research record has sunk even lower, despite the diminished status of USM's b-school these days. And now Chen's teaching is almost exclusively done online, presumably because of her dismal communication skills in the traditional classroom setting. What does that say? Even those who supported Chen's controversial 7th Year Review understand that she falls unacceptably short in the area that counts the most at USM -- teaching. And in its own way it's also an admission by USM administrators that, despite their protestations to the contrary, online delivery is indeed the red-headed stepchild of the education delivery world. All it took was the decision to retain Chen, and to put her online, in order to finally extract that bit of truth out of the powers that be.

31st & Pearl is a series housed at usmnews.net that features commentary on aspects of life in the CoB from a variety of columnists.