

The cost of a presidential search

By *VALERIE WELLS* [Published in the Hattiesburg American, 07/20/08]

The state College Board and the University of Southern Mississippi spent more than \$106,000 on the presidential search for Martha Saunders and almost \$12,000 moving her to Hattiesburg.

"It was finding the right person in the right place at the right time," said Robin Robinson of Laurel, a member of the state College Board.

Information from a public records request filed by the Hattiesburg American shows that \$89,056 of the \$106,312.55 - or almost 84 percent -went to the consulting firm Greenwood/Asher and Associates Inc., based in Miramar Beach, Fla.

The rest of the costs included travel expenses for board members, office supplies for meetings and food for the search committee. Advertising for the position in the national publication Chronicle of Higher Education was \$5,355.

Saunders started her job as president in May 2007. Previously, she had been chancellor of University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. The first money for her search was spent in November 2006.

"Anything we spent was worth it because of the result," said Ray Scurfield, professor of social work at Southern Miss' Gulf Coast campus. "But I'm biased."

The total amount spent on the 2007 Southern Miss search is less than half of what the last Mississippi State University presidential search cost: \$224,913.20, according to The Clarion-Ledger.

Robert "Doc" Fogelsong was selected as president but served less than two years.

"What we learned from the search at MSU, we applied to the search at USM," Robinson said. "Communication is key."

Robinson said that was one area the College Board improved on with the Southern Miss search.

"What made a difference at USM was we actually had the alumni person, Bob Pierce, ask 'What can we do to help?'" She said everyone at Southern Miss was interested and wanted to be involved in the process.

"That's why it went so well."

While the Southern Miss search was going on from November 2006 through May 2007, Alcorn State University in Lorman was also looking for a new president. Many of the meetings and some of the expenses were shared by the two universities.

George E. Ross was selected as Alcorn's president in June 2007, but did not take office until January 2008 due to medical reasons.

The presidential search involved some secrecy. The names of the candidates were not made public.

"I wish the process could be as open as it used to be, but I'm not so sure that's true anymore," said Stephen Judd, who during the Southern Miss search was president-elect of the Faculty Senate.

Judd and other senators met with Tom Meredith, state commissioner of higher education, to discuss involving more professors in the search and also to make the search more transparent. Meredith was fair in allowing more faculty members to be involved, but kept the process tight because of the belief that the best candidates won't apply if their names are made public.

"It's a reasonable argument," Judd said.

The expense of more than \$100,000 is also reasonable, he said. The consulting firm screened all the applicants and vetted their backgrounds.

"It takes money to get good people in these executive positions."

Some the issues raised by the report are these:

1. Why did this information require a public records request? That screams out "not a transparent organization". There is nothing that can be done about it now, and Dr. Saunders certainly did not authorize it herself.
2. Does anyone at the IHL, or elsewhere, perform a cost-benefit analysis to see if such expenditures are efficient? Here, was the \$89,056 paid to the consultants worth it? What is the purpose of the search committee?
3. Why have search committees if the members have limited use and limited input?
4. Why have such large search committees at all? It is obviously too large to be effective.
5. Is the best justification for this that Mississippi State spent more than twice this amount for a bad match as its president?
6. If the process is to be so controlled by the IHL, let them do it and pay for it.
7. Are all these searches a reason for tight budgets and no raises?
8. After one year, what have the tax payers of Mississippi and the stakeholders of USM received from Dr. Saunders? The response that she is "not Shelby Thames" is both obvious and unresponsive. What has she done?