

## The more things change ...

Here we go again. For the past several years, RETENTION has been the magic administrative buzzword. Since Dr. Rodney Bennett's [arrival](#) he has held out the word as if it were a magic talisman against the evils of budget cuts. On [19-Aug-2013](#), *The Hattiesburg American's* presser reported Bennett's first student convocation and "... the emphasis is unmistakably clear. Retention. Progression. Graduation."

It's not the first time we heard about RETENTION. Let's go back to April-2009 when former President Martha Saunders created the position of assistant provost for student success -- who still holds the title of Affiliate in the Office of the Provost -- Brent Kemker, the inaugural holder of the post. At the time of his appointment, [Dr. Kemker explained](#) "My role in the provost's office will be facilitating university support for our students and their successful graduation." So, what have Kemker and/or Bennett accomplished? Apparently very little.

On 2-Sept-2011, during a USM faculty senate meeting, [Saunders was asked](#) "How are we doing on retention? A lot of effort has been spent there." Saunders' answer? "We won't have these numbers for a few weeks. I don't think it's real good news. I'm not sure all of these efforts are paying off."

Two more years have passed since Saunders acknowledged *her* failed efforts; yet, as stated by [THA](#) "That [course completion] has been a challenge in the past for the university. Southern Miss has the third-highest graduation rate of any public university in the state, but still lags far behind Ole Miss and Mississippi State." In fact, in 2013, the graduation rate (the ultimate retention statistic) for Southern Miss is abysmal: 4-Year Graduation Rate: 22% and 6-Year Graduation Rate: 47%. By 2015, those figures had [dropped again](#): 4-Year Graduation Rate: 21%, 6-Year Graduation Rate: 45%.

Now, faced with a new round of budget cuts allegedly based on declining enrollment and retention, VP for Finance and Administration [Doug Vinzant](#) gave what a number of sources characterize a rather bizarre explanation of how the University intends to address its problems:

Vinzant said the university is working to increase enrollment again.

"We have struggled with retention and we have struggled with recruitment and we are addressing those in a number of ways," he said. "If you fail to address those things, you're going to have to balance revenue and expense."

Vinzant said there are multiple factors that play into increasing enrollment.

In terms of retention, the university must help students who are struggling in their courses so they can complete them and move on in their program of study. There is also help that must be given to the students who are not sufficiently prepared to be successful, he said.

Then, there are the students who aren't ready for college.

"Students who have come to us wanting a college education but haven't taken the courses necessary to enroll," Vinzant said. "It's not only the subject matter they need preparation in, it's how to study at the college level."

As numerous sources have questioned "did he [Vinzant] really say that? Did he just admit that the University will admit and pass anyone regardless of qualifications."

Curiously, Vinzant's plan to improve cash flow seems squarely at odds with the position announced less than a year ago by his boss, [Rodney Bennett](#). "While others across the country may have opted to grow enrollment at any or all costs, including quality, we have chosen a different path," University President Rodney D. Bennett said. "We have chosen to be intentionally better and stronger."

Even more troubling is that Vinzant doesn't mention that of these improvidently admitted students only 21% of all students (including those who are ready to start college) will graduate in four years and only 45% of all students (including those who are prepared to start college) will graduate in six years. How many of the 65% who don't graduate in six years, and probably never graduate, borrow tens of thousands of dollars which they must pay back without the benefit of a degree?