

The State of Our University

A Look at USM President Martha Saunders' First Fall Convocation

New Southern Miss President Martha Saunders' first Fall Convocation, which began at 3:00pm (in Bennett Auditorium) on 13-Sept-07 and was over by about 3:40pm, included inspirational slides and videos, as well as a "State of the University" speech from Saunders. There is much ground to cover, so let's get started.

USM Going Undercover

During her "State of the University" speech, Saunders delighted in the fact that USM's online course offerings had increased by 45.9 percent in recent times. According to other details Saunders cited, the number of students enrolling in USM's cyber offerings rose by a similar percentage. The glee shown by Saunders at these statistics represents part of what Interim CoB Dean Alvin Williams described to CoB faculty at the College's Fall 2007 convocation on 31-Aug-07. There, Williams told CoB faculty that CoB resistance to online education was futile. "That train has already left the station," Williams told CoB faculty. With Saunders' "SotU" comments about online courses, CoB faculty in attendance got a firsthand impression of what Williams had conveyed just two weeks before. Given the state of affairs, Williams is urging the CoB to put its entire "core" online so that Saunders continues "smiling" on the CoB.

More Spin on Enrollment Numbers

Saunders chose to use the phrase "Enrollment this fall has held close to level" to describe what *The Hattiesburg American* and USMNEWS.NET have reported is a drop in enrollment anywhere from 185 to 409 students. Backing up Saunders' use of the phrase are statistics she cited showing that USM's "duplicated headcount" enrollment has fallen by less than 1 percent. Of course, the "duplicated headcount" method counts students who are enrolled at USM-H *and* USM-GC *twice*, not once. Using this reporting method, the more educational venues you have, the greater the number of times that a given person/student will count towards the institution's total enrollment.

Saunders Weighs in on "Conspiracy Theory"

For years "USM people" have harbored the belief that both Ole Miss and State have used the omnibus governing board system (the IHL) to keep USM down. Many believe that former USM President Horace Fleming's demise was related to his insistence on challenging the so-called conspiracy. Well, during her "SotU" speech, new USM President Martha Saunders made a remark that breathes new life into those who would believe in such a conspiracy. Saunders told those USM

faculty, staff, alumni, et al. assembled in Bennett Auditorium that, over the past generation (1970–2007), “Southern Miss has done what no one gave it permission to do,” and that it has become a *nationally-respected, research-oriented* four-year institution of higher learning. While many in Oxford, Starkville, other parts of Mississippi and the nation would doubt the veracity of Saunders’ nationally-respected claim – and in doing so they would be supported by USM’s Tier IV designation from *U.S. News & World Report* – the mere claim to have done it (by Saunders) is sure to get the non-USM natives restless again. With tuition at what Saunders called “a tipping point,” and with little expectation of significant increases in State E&G funding (according to Saunders), the “national rep” claim may do USM more harm than good in the long term. Only time will tell.

Southern Miss . . . To The Top!

Saunders seemed most excited when expressing her pleasure at all of the athletic venue expansions/renovations across the campus. The video clips showed expansions at M.M. Roberts, Pete Taylor, and Reed Green. While these pictures likely infuriated many of the CoAL faculty in attendance, Saunders is not one to shy away from touting athletics (see her blog). Despite her excitement, Saunders referred to “Conference–USA” as the “C–USA Conference,” a gaffe that will have *Eagle Talkers* upset as word about the “SotU” travels to places like Po-Boy Express. However, she did close by indicating that “all of our sports are looking for banner years.” It’s possible, given this comment, that Saunders overlooked the fact that three of “our sports” have already gotten significantly into their respective seasons. These are football (1-1-0), women’s soccer (1-4-0), and women’s volleyball (4-7-0). Based on the W-L-T (won-lost-tied) numbers shown above, the winning percentages of these three sports currently ranges from only 20.0 percent to just 50.0 percent, with an overall mark of just 33.3 percent.

She’s Got Donna Davis Eyes

In laying out a plan for the advancement of USM, Saunders ended the “SotU” with a management-speak binge capable of making even CoB MIS professor Donna Davis jealous. Saunders explained that she was setting up “campus dialogues to create inspired action.” These dialogues would each be comprised of “30 or so” campus constituents, who are to converge on a few “energy areas” that will comprise a “plan for the future.” According to Saunders, such a plan will contain “measurable goals” involving “tactical decision-making” and certain “benchmarks.” At the end of the process, every department on USM’s campus will identify “strategies and tactics” and participate in the “core dialogues” that will work to move USM forward. Look for more details on this new *core dialogue* plan at www.usm.edu.