

“You Can’t Handle the Truth.”

N777AQ may be familiar. If not, it should be. It is a tail number used for identifying and tracking airplanes. This particular number is the found on President Saunders’ plane. It is leased from USM’s Foundation during this time of recession and severe budget cuts, including the potential demolition of an entire academic program. Dr. Saunders has taken steps to conceal information about its flights. As a result, she is obscuring the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of her decision.

“This aircraft (N777AQ) is not available for tracking per request from the owner/operator.”

See, <http://flightaware.com/live/flight/N777AQ>.

Dr. Saunders has taken steps to conceal the information even though her plane has been placed into public use and is costing students, faculty, and taxpayers millions in lease payments, maintenance, fuel, personnel, insurance, etc.

Why does Dr. Saunders need her own airplane? Dr. Saunders was quoted in the *Hattiesburg American*, saying, "I recently needed to attend a one-day meeting in Jacksonville. I had to leave the day before in order to get there in time for my early morning meeting and spent two nights in a hotel in order to make my connections back to Hattiesburg. If I'd had access to a university plane, I would not have lost two days in the office."

In terms of actual dollars and cents and plane miles logged, what was she talking about?

In a [Student Printz](#) editorial, p. 5, I encouraged readers to “[t]ry your hand at a cost-benefit analysis of President Saunders’ airplane. Here’s how to get started. Observe for yourself the actual usage of the plane. A link to FlightAware provides real-time tracking by tail number: <http://flightaware.com/live/flight/N777AQ>.”

Thereafter, [usmnews.net](#) “readers provided ... cost-benefit analyses of the lease/purchase of Saunders’ airplane. ... The first report for

February 2009 includes three short round trips (100-200 miles each way) costing \$10,500 per round trip. The second report for February and March 2009 includes a variety of trips that cost a total of \$63,000 using the airplane. A contributor calculated that these trips should have cost a total of \$2,289.19, using cars or commercial planes.”

Is Dr. Saunders’ convenience worth such an excessive amount of money – money that is coming from the pockets of taxpayers and USM’s students? Apparently, Dr. Saunders did not want students, taxpayers, and faculty to be able to provide an informed answer to that question. She has insured that none of us can continue to calculate the actual cost/benefit of her airplane.

The information is now completely hidden behind the doors of The USM Foundation.

How? Isn’t USM a public institution subject to the Mississippi Open Records Act?

Here is the administrative claim: *“USM’s Foundation is a private institution independent of USM and is not subject to open records requests.”*

However, the facts are quite different. USM’s Foundation receives millions of state taxpayer dollars to support its operations, even though the mission of the Foundation is to support USM—not the other way around.

Between 2003 and 2005 (the last years the editor was able to obtain access to the information), more than seventy percent of the total general, administrative and fund-raising costs of the USM Foundation have been paid with public dollars. Between 2003 and 2005, USM paid more than \$3,169,846.00 to support its Foundation. The total general and administrative and fund raising expenses of the Foundation for the same period totaled \$4,466,875.00. Stated somewhat differently, public funds – your funds -- provided nearly 71% of the costs of operating the Foundation. (As an aside, we do not know if the Foundation raises enough funds each year to cover the remaining 29 percent or whether previous contributions are being used to pay the cost.)

USM Foundation expenditures occur without public accountability. However, details reveal the administrative slight of hand. The head of the USM Foundation is a vice president at USM, appointed by and reporting to USM's president. The USM Foundation occupies -- cost free -- a University building. The USM Foundation employees are paid by USM and are part of the state retirement system. The USM Foundation sits on USM's organization chart as an integral part of USM. So, regardless of the claim that USM's Foundation is "independent." The details of the USM Foundation reveal a clear dependence on state taxpayer dollars. The slight of hand has a financial purpose. Unless President Saunders chooses to divulge a cost benefit analysis for the use of the \$2+ million of your tax/tuition dollars for her airplane, she can keep the details secret." (See DePree editorials in [Meridian Star](#), and [Student Printz](#), p. 5)

Dr. Saunders imposes secrecy, closing off travel information on FlightAware and hiding information in the USM Foundation. The USM Foundation is where administrators hide their—as characterized by USM's previous College of Business Dean Harold Doty—"booze accounts."

It appears to me that the airplane is just one more "booze account" to be hidden from public questions and scrutiny.

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