

## USM's Sleight of Hand Re: ACT Scores

USM, its PR personnel, and anonymous advocates have gone all out to rationalize the steep decline in student population over the past several years. They're desperate to say all's okay, we planned the declining student population, we're on target and expect the same wonderful outcomes in the future, etc. They boast over and over that USM has intentionally increased student ACT scores—historical highs—and Mississippians must understand that its decline in student population must be expected.

This is typical USM slight of hand. Let's look at the facts. The [IHL reports](#) that USM ACT scores are actually below average in Mississippi institutions of higher education. UM and MSU have much higher ACT scores.

ASU	DSU	JSU	MSU	MUW	MVSU	UM*	USM	SYSTEM
18.4	20.7	18.9	24.4	21.1	17.4	24.3	22.5	22.8

\* Excludes the Medical Center.

While we're at it, let's take a look at another very important measure of university performance: graduation rates.

ASU	DSU	JSU	MSU	MUW	MVSU	UM*	USM	SYSTEM
32.5%	32.3%	40.1%	60.2%	39.2%	24.1%	60.4%	46.9%	49.7%

\*Excludes the Medical Center.

Again, USM is woefully behind UM and MSU's graduation rate and even falls below the IHL published average of Mississippi schools.

The facts simply don't support USM's claims. In fact, the data is more in line with statements made in June 2014 by Vice President for Finance and Administration Douglas Vinzant, (Enrollment decline leads to budget cuts at USM, HA, July 4, 2015.) Mr. Vinzant admitted:

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." (Enrollment decline leads to budget cuts at USM, HA, July 4, 2015.)

Based on Mr. Vinzant's comments we must question whether an increase in quality did occur. USM is quick to attach quality as an explanation for a decline in enrollment, but is USM merely manipulating statistics? Unfortunately, the answer to that question appears to be yes.