What is Your Expectation of Email Privacy at the University of Southern Mississippi?

From time to time, all of us should review the privacy faculty and students should expect of their emails that pass through any USM server. The history and policy statements of USM administrators signals that faculty and students should assume there is no privacy for their email communications.

The clearest statement of USM policy on this issue relates to students.

"02.14.13 Student Email Policy, THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI, Information Technology, Student Email Policy" warns students that … *4. Privacy* "Extreme caution should be taken in using e-mail to communicate confidential or sensitive information. Users should not assume that e-mail is private and confidential." http://www.usm.edu/institutional-policies/021413-student-email-policy

No similar policy statement could be found with regard to expectations faculty should have with regard to privacy of their emails that pass through USM servers. If there is no policy, as long as USM administrators follow the law, they are free to monitor faculty email. As USM administrators will be quick to tell you, "there is nothing that says we can't." And, the law clearly allows the owners of servers to monitor the messages that pass through their servers.

History may also be instructive: On July 9, 2004, George Mason University's History News Network reported that "Since the University of Southern Mississippi's current Computer Use Policy was adopted in the October 2002, the administration of President Shelby Thames has claimed the authority to read any email sent from or received on a university computer, to copy the contents of any hard drive on any university computer, and to seize computers from employees at any time, for any reason… The USM Faculty Senate has a choice. If it moves swiftly to put forward a strict email privacy policy, it will do groundbreaking work and ensure loads of favorable publicity for its cause, while hastening the end of the Thames regime. If it falls back on reacting to administrative initiatives, or seeking to smooth things over with Thames and his administrators, it will have done its part to keep Shelby Thames in office for another two years, while insuring that one of his very worst policies remains in force after he is finally fired or his contract runs out." http://hnn.us/blogs/entries/6087.html

September 7, 2007 USM Faculty Senate Minutes includes "4.1.10 Email privacy policy: [Faculty Senator Stephen] Judd urged the Technology Committee to work on an email privacy policy." http://www.usm.edu/fsenate/minutes/2007-9-7.htm

Well, so much for the Faculty Senate winning "a strict email privacy policy" much less "moving swiftly."

We at usmnews.net have found nothing in USM's policies that in any way prohibit administrators from monitoring email. Therefore, faculty and students should exercise appropriate caution when communicating over USM computers or servers. Faculty and student email communications are not private.