

Do Faculty Get What They Deserve?

UVa Provides a Few Lessons

Do we know why President Saunders stepped down as president in the final weeks of last semester? (For those of you who are not denizens of higher education, that's unusual and frequently signals trouble.)

The fact that the question has been repeatedly asked indicates that the IHL needs an attitude adjustment. It needs to move from its model of secrecy to openness. It needs to discuss [corruption and inefficiencies](#) and ineffectiveness, not hide them. If Mississippi higher education is to move beyond its myriad problems, its leadership must discuss problems openly with citizens. And, when the IHL fails, could USM's faculty have the courage and intelligence to correct the IHL and its school's administrators?

Recently, the governing board of University of Virginia fired its president. Sound familiar? What did UVa's faculty do? What did USM's faculty do when the IHL "accepted the resignation" of Martha Saunders? Let's briefly compare the two cases.

In today's CHE, "[What We Learned At UVa](#)," spelled out what has been the recent power struggle over the future of UVa. Mr. Siva Vaidhyathan recounts a few lessons for us to consider at the IHL and USM:

As much as I like and respect President Teresa Sullivan of the University of Virginia, the two-week struggle to restore her to her office was never about her. It was about who gets to guide the future of a great public research university. And in a sense, it was about how all great public research universities will be governed and guided in the next few years.

In fact, at the end of two weeks, when confronted by a united student body and faculty, the governing board reversed its decision, and returned Dr. Sullivan to the presidency.

Here's Mr. Siva Vaidhyathan's next paragraph:

That's why it was so gratifying to receive supportive correspondence from people around the world. Alumni and students were the most vocal. They saw the potential hijacking of UVa by a small cabal of market- and techno-fundamentalists as a clear danger to not only the traditions of their alma mater but to the very value of the degrees they have earned.

It's laughable to even ask, can anyone say that about USM and the recent "retirement" of Martha Saunders? Why not? Was she so incompetent or corrupt that she had no choice but to step down? Or, was she really just so tired that a vacation would not allow her to continue to "ride all the rides?" Or, did the IHL conclude that to save itself the embarrassment of owning up to its decision to hire a failed president, the reasons had to be kept secret?

Citizens can guess all they want, but it is unlikely we will ever know the truth. Institutional secrecy contributes to educational institutions in Mississippi being viewed as bottom of the

barrel, because the IHL doesn't have to learn from its mistakes. It just quietly buries them. The IHL and its administrators keep on making the same mistakes again and nobody knows the difference.

Do you think USM faculty could function like the faculty at a great public institution like UVa. According to Mr. Vaidhyanathan:

“Discipline” is not a word one usually associates with committees of faculty members. And it's almost never applied to a faculty senate. But our Faculty Senate surprised everyone with its careful articulation of reasonable demands, its moral authority to speak for the entire faculty of every school at the university, and its clear, unified, sober response to every development. When many of us doubted that we could persuade the Board of Visitors to restore President Sullivan, the core leadership of the Faculty Senate refused to waiver from that clear and modest demand...Every public university across the country could face a similar crisis soon. It might not be a showdown with a board. It could be a clash with the president or provost. It could be a schism within the faculty. Regardless, a trustworthy faculty senate is essential at those moments. We at UVa will never again take it for granted.

The report continues by recounting the support of students and alumni in taking back their university. Would USM students be sufficiently independent-minded to mount a concerted effort to support a respected president? Would alumni be able to see beyond their desire for a “world class” football team?

Could USM faculty ever say this about itself?

The [Faculty Senate](#) here [at UVa] has transformed itself into a major player, the guiding force that galvanized alumni, students, and community members in demanding that the university bring Ms. Sullivan back.

In truth, why should students and faculty go out on a limb to bring back a president so foolish and self-centered as to use student and taxpayer money during “The Great Recession” to lease a multi-million dollar airplane while firing tenured faculty and presiding over mounting tuition and fees?

The title of this article might be “Why USM is not World Class Anything.”