

Reader Responds, 11-Mar-09

Wag the Dog Redux?

A Reader's Take on President Saunders' Major Announcement of March 10, 2009

On March 10, 2009, USM President Martha D. Saunders called the USM community together, press included, for a major announcement. That announcement turned out to be a donation to the University of \$6 million, \$5 million of which will be devoted to student scholarships, with, according to staffers at *The Hattiesburg American*, the remaining \$1 million ". . . going to strategic initiatives." Saunders told those same *THA* staffers that the gift, which came anonymously, is ". . . the single largest cash gift ever received by the university." Finally, regarding the anonymity of the donor, Saunders remarked: "We cannot answer questions about the motivations or interests of the giver."



It is not uncommon for universities to receive anonymous gifts. It happens with regularity. However, I suspect it is rather uncommon for a university's largest-ever donation, particularly in the case of universities as large as, and larger than USM (i.e., > 15,000 students), to have come from an anonymous source. Think about what that means in this case. Without a name, there can be no named college, and a \$6 million donation should just about do that for donations-poor USM. Without a name, there can also be no named professors, another item that USM is in sore need of at the moment. No, in this case, the anonymous *cash* gift is going to student scholarships (83.3%) and "strategic initiatives" (16.7%).

Let's start with the latter, "strategic initiatives." First thought – this is money the dome will be spending on this, or that. It won't go to faculty, or even to **academics** *per se*. No, it will go towards something like an Office for Student Success, possibly even an Assistant Provost for Student Success. That is, it will support those student retention efforts that USM history professor William Scarborough so deftly mocked (to faculty applause) at the Saunders Town Meeting last month. As for the former, student scholarships, this is great, but these will be untraceable given the anonymity of the donor – i.e., the scholarships can't come with a name attached.

All of this is a moot point, really. The \$6 million, assuming it is a *cash* gift and not a *planned* gift, is now in the USM Foundation. It may as well now be in CIA headquarters for all we'll ever know about its *use*, or even its *existence*. And that's how this brief little

journey takes us back to the first question many of us had about the anonymous donation: Is this donation *real*, or was it created by the "spin doctor" Saunders administration, ala the Robert De Niro/Dustin Hoffman flick *Wag the Dog*, in an effort to turn attention away from USM's problems, beginning with the \$8 million to \$12 million dollar budget shortfall? It's all too perfect, it seems, to be real isn't it?

Reader Response, 11-Mar-09

The following response was sent to USMNEWS.net on 11-Mar-09 by an "Avid Reader" of the website's reports and editorials:

Dear usmnews.net:

While this is wonderful news for Southern Miss, I am a bit confused. How does spending so much money on student scholarships relate to a virtually open admissions standard? Why does Southern Miss continue to "buy" mediocre students? Wouldn't it be a better use of the money to try to attract more academically gifted students?

Thank you.

Avid Reader

As you can see, Avid Reader reiterates *and* extends USM history professor William Scarborough's point about the folly of pursuing higher rates of retention in an open admissions university. Assuming the gift of \$6 million is both *real* and a *cash* gift, then we might expect the \$5 million portion of it to provide USM with about \$250,000 annually. At \$5,000/year per scholarship, this money will generate 50 new scholarships. Will these be new students, and ones who scored at or even below the USM average on the ACT? Will these go to current students? These are all questions related to Avid Reader's letter above.