

# Wiki Tweaks

An Editorial by *Susan Green-Lewis*

If you visit the *Wikipedia* [entry entitled](#) "University of Southern Mississippi," you will find that many of the sordid details of the Shelby F. Thames administration of USM (2002-07) are contained there (see the "Recent Developments" section). For example, one paragraph begins with "The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century at Southern Miss saw controversy, in the person of Dr. Shelby Thames." It goes on to say that Thames "attempted to fire" two tenured professors that he believed "committed identity fraud" in collecting information about one of his vice presidents. Of course, long-time followers of USM understand that the passage refers to actions allegedly undertaken by Frank Glamser and Gary Stringer in search of information about then-VP Angeline Dvorak. The entry goes on to describe Thames as "undiplomatic, aggressive, and perhaps even uncouth," at least in the eyes of his "subordinates in academia." This part of entry concludes by pointing out that USM's academic reputation was damaged by Thames, with USM's position in the *U.S. News & World Report's America's Best Colleges* falling in 2004 from Tier 3 to Tier 4, the lowest position. But, it adds, in 2009, with Thames gone, USM made an "atypically large jump back into the upper portion of Tier 3," and that in 2011 USM is listed as a Tier 2 institution.

Much of what is written in *Wikipedia* about Thames, and what is recounted above, is not disputed here. Thames was indeed a controversial figure who did a significant amount of damage to the university's reputation while president from 2002-07. Still, the last portion of the paragraph above is not even close to the true story, given that it fails to mention (1) that USM fell back into Tier 4 after 2009, and (2) that *U.S. News & World Report* discarded the four-tier system in 2011, in favor of a two-tier one. Thus, the Martha Saunders administration (2007-present) has put USM right back to where Thames sent it in 2004. Clearly, this part of the entry needs amending. This need brings us to the heart of this column, and that is the open-access system upon which *Wikipedia* operates. At the bottom of the "University of Southern Mississippi" entry one can see that it was last modified by *someone in the general public* on 26-Jan-2011 (at least at the time of this writing). It is quite possible, if not probable, that Saunders has tasked someone in the communications division of her administration to monitor such entries, and to make sure they shine the most positive light possible on her and her USM administration.

Now we move to yet another *Wikipedia* entry, this one entitled “Martha Dunagin Saunders.” Yes, unlike Thames, Saunders [has her own](#) *Wikipedia* story, and it is also littered with holes and missing information. It, for the most part, simply parrots all of the public relations material that the USM communications office has disseminated about Saunders since even before she was named USM president in 2007. For example, it states that she has “taught thousands of students,” she has produced “numerous publications” on crisis communication and public relations, her speeches are “widely anthologized,” and she is a past winner of the Public Relations Society of America’s highest national award. Clearly, Saunders’ *Wikipedia* entry – which was last modified on 26-Sept-2010, presumably by a member of her communications team (administration) – is in serious need of a reality check. The list of missing details is as “numerous” as the published research entries that it purports are on Saunders’ vitae. No mention is given to Saunders’ now-infamous decision to sign a \$2 million lease of a Beechcraft King Air airplane in the midst of the Great Recession and one of the worst fiscal periods in recent Mississippi history. Nothing is there about the fact that Saunders has so far delivered almost 50 terminal letters to tenured and tenure-track faculty in order to address budget cuts that have arisen since 2009.

Where is the line about all of the campus violence and Greek hazing that has occurred under Saunders’ watch? What about the public and highly controversial firing by Saunders of former USM football coach Jeff Bower? Why no mention of the APG and UPC, and why they have become a part of the USM lexicon? The list goes on and on, and at least some of these things, if not all, deserve inclusion in both of the *Wikipedia* entries discussed here. It’s time for someone in the USM community to step up and “modify” these two entries. If not, then either Thames or one of his supporters should at least sign on and delete all mention of controversy and diminished academic reputation in the *Wikipedia* story about USM.