

Will the Real USM Please Stand Up?

A GUEST COLUMN

As WDAM-7 reporter Karrie Leggett-Brown discovered [when she interviewed](#) new USM president Rodney Bennett on 7-Feb-2013, USM's financial situation is not near the rosy picture painted in April-2012 by then-USM president Martha Saunders. Those in the USM family were surely surprised to see Bennett explain to Leggett-Brown — "I'm not going to be hesitant at all to cut programs, or to do what we need to do to get the enterprise back on stable footing." According to Bennett, "the enterprise" that is USM is currently not on stable footing. Bennett did not stop there, however, adding that "[t]he first focus is going to be to hire a chief financial officer . . . [o]nce the new chief financial officer is on board, we will start to look at faculty salaries and after faculty salaries we will begin to look at how we grow the student enrollment."

How can it be that USM is not currently on stable footing financially? Why does it seem, at least listening to Bennett, that USM's enrollment is part of the problem? When Saunders stood before the USM community on the day she announced her resignation from the presidency, she listed record after record, from private giving to enrollments. Yes, she included enrollments. In fact, Saunders seem to grow tired of listing all of the records and simply threw in "record *everything*" to catch any record she may have perhaps missed. Things were better at USM in late April-2012 than they had ever been, at least according to Saunders.

Another of Bennett's conclusions after visiting both USM and USMGC is that certain areas, particularly business, should have a much greater presence at USMGC. How can this be? When last we heard from the business college's ventures at USMGC, we learned that [the transfer of](#) the MBA program from the Hattiesburg to the Long Beach campus was a big mistake and that, even after only one year, the interim CoB administration of Joseph Peyrefitte had decided to reverse the transfer and bring the MBA program back north. How can Peyrefitte, a Saunders administration lower management holdover, see USM so much differently than Bennett? What is it that Saunders and Peyrefitte can see that is not also visible to Bennett?

Of course, the answer to the last question above is "nothing." I think Bennett has the true pulse of the situation, while Saunders and Peyrefitte are, or in one case were, simply public relations managers that are happy to spin stories about how great things are on campus and how well USM and the CoB are doing. Put simply, both organizations are shells of what they once were, and it is likely that Bennett is seeing through the smoke. If I am right, then both organizations may have real chance to start a comeback now. Let's hope.