

“Would That It Were So”

USM’s Basketball Reality vs. Saunders’ Fantasy

“Now, for those of you who may ‘lurk about’ sports message boards, I want to make something really clear for the record. Great public universities deserve great athletic programs. The Golden Eagle fan base should be assured that Southern Miss is doing all that it can to play at the highest level. Any university seeking to move up must bring value to the table. That includes a winning tradition . . . we have that . . . integrity . . . check . . . facilities . . . check . . . , and a fan base that buys tickets and fills stadiums, and we have a plan for that. **And, we are doing it with athletes who will actually graduate.**”

USM president Martha Saunders
USM Fall Convocation, Sept-2011

The quote above is, as noted, from USM president Martha Saunders’ Fall 2011 Convocation speech in Sept-2011. Then and there she was touting USM’s athletic successes, while at the same time bragging about the in-class achievements of the institution’s athletes. It is interesting to rehash this speech now, one day after Larry Eustachy’s Golden Eagles received an invitation to participate in the 2012 NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament. The 2012 invitation is just the third in the history of the institution, and each of the first two invites (1990 and 1991) resulted in first round defeats.

Upon obtaining a list of the 68 participating teams in 2012, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is [reporting that](#) eight of the invitees fall below the NCAA’s allowable academic threshold, also known as its Academic Progress Rate (APR). Among these are Colorado State, Mississippi Valley State, Norfolk State, St. Bonaventure, Connecticut, New Mexico State, and Ohio. For USMNEWS.net readers and those in the USM family, the most prominent among the list [compiled by](#) the University of Central Florida’s Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (UCFIDES) is none other than USM.¹ NCAA rules penalize teams scoring below 925 on the APR scale, and USM’s 2012 score is only 910, well below that allowable minimum. As it stands, USM’s shortcomings could result in the loss of 10 percent of the program’s scholarship slots, while continued failures could lead to postseason bans and practice time limitations, all in addition to scholarship losses. Beginning with the 2013 NCAA Tournament, the minimum allowable APR score rises to 930. In addition to the usual penalties for APR shortcomings, the UCFIDES reports that team’s in USM’s current position will not be allowed to participate in the NCAA Basketball Tournament.

Can you imagine Saunders having to take the podium and inform the USM family that, despite its 25-8 record, USM will not be allowed to participate in the NCAA Tournament because of its low APR score? Of course, that will not happen this year. However, with an unacceptable APR, it will occur in 2013 and beyond, even if the Eagles win 25, 30, or 35 basketball games leading up to the national championship tournament. For a president accustomed to scandals, many of which have fallen into the “major” category, that would be one for the ages.

¹ The UCFIDES reports that the APR was developed in 2004 as a four-year average of academic performance that rises as players remain academically eligible and progress towards graduation at a given institution.