Scope and Impact of Reduction or Cessation of Federal Earmarked Research Funding In Public Institutions of Higher Education in Mississippi
James H. Young, III, M.Ed. and Thelma Roberson, Ph.D.
The University of Southern Mississippi

INTRODUCTION
As the economic recession persists, state funding for public higher education continues to decline. Institutions of higher education are increasingly reliant on federally funded research to subsidize operational costs and maintain financial stability. Earmarks are congressionally directed funding mandates attached to appropriations legislation that allocate federal funds to specific projects and congressional districts. In recent years, earmarks have been an important source of research funding for higher education. This funding, however, is not immune to politically driven cost-cutting initiatives. Further reductions or cessation of federal earmarked research funding will potentially impact the financial stability of research universities and institutions of higher education in Mississippi and throughout the nation. The significance of this impact remains to be seen. However, senior level academic officials in Mississippi are making contingency plans and encouraging increased pursuit of competitive grant funding to offset losses created by declining earmarked research funding. This study explores the scope and impact of reduction or cessation of federal earmarked research funding at public institutions of higher education in Mississippi, particularly, The University of Southern Mississippi (USM).

METHODS (continued)
Interview participants were selected based on two criteria: (1) in-depth knowledge of university research funding process, policies, and programs and (2) access to pertinent data and resources useful for informing this research. Interview guides were developed to provide direction for the scheduled interviews. IRB protocol was followed throughout the study. A research cover letter and informed consent form were provided for each interviewee. Permission was requested and granted for audio recording of the interviews. Following completion of the interviews, transcripts of the discussions were created and subsequently used to analyze the scope and impact of reduction or cessation of federal earmarked research funding at public institutions of higher education in Mississippi, particularly, USM.

FINDINGS
According to Dr. Saunders, research funding constitutes one-third of USM’s total budget, while only 6-7% of the overall budget is attributed to earmarked research funding. In addition, Dr. Saunders reported that for FY 2012, USM has received no congressionally directed research funding, a decline from the $22 million received in FY 2011. All three interview participants highlighted the current emphasis on the shift to a more competitive funding model. Dr. Borsig explained that a reduction in earmark funding does not translate into the demise of university research. Though funding sources are likely to change, research will continue in Mississippi and across the nation. Dr. Kamali believes this shift to a more competitive model will benefit higher education. Greater competition among research universities fosters greater innovation and ingenuity, and consequently, more impactful research.

Based on the perspectives of the interview participants, the most appropriate response to the reduction of earmark funding is to encourage and reward increased number of researchers within the institutions to submit high quality competitive grant proposals.

DISCUSSION
There is no foreseeable reprieve from the stagnant economic climate in America. Institutions of higher education will continually face the challenge of accomplishing more academically with dwindling resources. Congressionally directed funding will, at best, face reductions, and, at worst, face cessation. Institutions of higher education, including USM, must find alternative means of subsidizing funding shortages. While it is not likely that a reduction in or cessation of earmark research funding would result in institutional closures, it is possible that programs or the number of faculty could be reduced.

The instability associated with congressionally directed funding has already triggered a university response to pursue research funding independent of earmarks. Particularly, institutions of higher education will now, more than ever, emphasize the importance of competitive grant funding. Competitive funding is a more stable option for sustainable research funding. Further exploration of the planning and processes already in place, and those being developed, would enhance the findings from this study.

The scope of this study was limited by time constraints and a small sample size. Greater time allotment for institutional visits and data collection would enhance this research by offering a basis for distinction between earmark research funds and non-congressionally directed funding. Further, greater specificity in regards to institutional impact of earmark reductions and cessation would be possible.

Reduction or cessation of federal earmarked research funding in Mississippi should not necessarily equate to a negative impact. These challenges should be utilized as a foundation for increased and improved research endeavors in the state. The competitive grant process should not be feared because Mississippi and its institutions of higher can compete.