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USM Faculty Senate

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Faculty Senate Statement on the Hattiesburg Business Meeting

March 18, 2005

Members of the USM Faculty Senate wish to respond to topics and comments made prior to and at the meeting of “business leaders” held at Warren Paving on March 10, 2005. In an article appearing in the March 3, 2005 issue of the Independent, Mrs. Bonnie Drews, one of the meeting's hosts, is quoted as stating that “the issue is whether USM will continue primarily as a liberal arts university or whether it will focus on technology.” She is further quoted as stating that the liberal arts and liberal arts faculty have “set the direction of USM for the past 25 years,” and that Dr. Thames is attempting to change the university's direction “despite opposition from the liberal arts faculty.”

The faculty at USM have not and do not consider the university to be “primarily a liberal arts university.” Although the liberal arts and the fine arts certainly flourished under the leadership of Dr. Aubrey Lucas, strong programs also developed in science, business, nursing, education, and psychology (to name a few) within the “past 25 years.” Students and their parents have every right to expect USM to be a comprehensive university with faculty throughout who excel in teaching, research, and service.

Opposition to the present administration is not solely from the liberal arts faculty but is actually widespread among the faculty. In the faculty-wide no confidence vote of March 10, 2004, 462 faculty voted, with 93% of those voting choosing no confidence. The total liberal arts faculty at the time numbered less than 200 individuals. The inescapable mathematical conclusion is that the majority of faculty voting no confidence were from colleges OTHER THAN the College of Liberal Arts (now the College of Arts and Letters).

According to the Hattiesburg American, after the March 10th meeting business spokesperson Bob Mixon criticized some comments posted anonymously on the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) website calling for violence against meeting organizers. First, we are not aware of any call for violence posted on the AAUP website. Second, on a message board anyone can post anything under any name he/she chooses. Third, of course no meeting organizers or attendees were subjected to violence by faculty members.

Mr. Mixon is further quoted as stating that “opponents' attempts to unseat him [Thames], in my opinion, is only one step in a much more ambitious agenda.” We have no idea what this ominous “much more ambitious agenda” includes and would very much like Mr. Mixon to be more specific regarding this allegation. Our agenda has been, and continues to be, an expectation that the administration conducts itself in a competent and upright manner, and consults with faculty leaders BEFORE important decisions are made affecting the faculty and their students, not AFTER. For the last two and a half years the faculty of the university have constantly been in the unfortunate position of having to react to hasty decisions made by the administration without input.

Mr. Mixon emphasized that everyone at the university build a “positive rapport” with the media. We agree, but suggest that excluding media from a meeting such as was practiced at this meeting of business leaders is not a good start. Mr. Mixon was also quoted as being receptive to the idea of holding future meetings between community leaders and faculty members, suggesting that such meetings would be “absolutely essential” to finding solutions to the current troubles on the USM campuses. We would happily attend such meetings and await an invitation. Interestingly, over the last two years the leaders of the USM Faculty Senate have NEVER been asked to address a meeting of alumni or business leaders to discuss the problems which have disrupted our university.

It should be clear to all observers that the events which have upset the campus have originated with the USM administration, not with the faculty. A few examples of such events include the attempted firings of two distinguished, tenured professors, the inflated enrollment numbers, the ill-conceived and inadequate drug and alcohol policy, the fall of the university to the lowest possible tier in the U.S. News and World Report, the premature post-tenure review report, the SACS probation, and the recent dispute between the Dean of the Business College and the administration over research goals and programs. All of these issues had their origin in the university's administration. For faculty to ignore such missteps through lack of comment would have been an evasion of their responsibilities as members of the university community. We remain committed to a University of Southern Mississippi where the input and ideas of all of its members are valued and where such input and ideas would be elicited and considered by the administration before significant decisions are made.

Signed,
Faculty Senate Executive Committee,
per motion of the Faculty Senate at Large