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Letter to Urge the IHL Board of Trustees to Begin the Search Process to Select a New President for USM

USM Faculty Senate

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Motion from the Faculty Senate of the University of Southern Mississippi, February 2, 2005:

Sent On: February 7, 2005

Sent To: Members of the Board of Trustees of Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL)

From: The Faculty Senate of The University of Southern Mississippi (USM)

Topic: A Faculty Senate Vote to Urge the IHL Board of Trustees to Begin the Search Process to Select a New President for USM

At a February 2, 2005 special meeting of the USM Faculty Senate, faculty senators passed the MOTION that follows by a margin of 39-2. In addition to the motion, this letter (which was also endorsed by the Faculty Senate) consists of OBSERVATIONS related to the motion.

THE MOTION

We respectfully request that the IHL Board of Trustees begin as soon as possible in spring 2005 a national search to find a successor to Dr. Shelby F. Thames, current President of The University of Southern Mississippi (USM). The four-year term for Dr. Thames will conclude in May 2006, and the goal of a national search should be to have the successor to Dr. Thames identified in time to have a smooth transition of leadership during the latter stages of spring 2006. This target date will also mean that the SACS reaffirmation of accreditation process for USM, scheduled for spring 2006, will be complete before a new president takes office.

In making this request, we want to assure members of the Board of Trustees that USM faculty members will do all they can between now and the end of spring semester 2006 to help remove USM from SACS probation and have SACS accreditation reaffirmed in spring semester 2006. We also want to state clearly that the Thames Administration has been marked by controversy and misjudgments, and we believe that a second four-year term for Dr. Thames is not in the best interests of USM or higher education in Mississippi.

OBSERVATIONS

The controversies during the two and one-half years of the Thames Administration are well documented. Much more could be said, but we prefer to feature a response to a recent article appearing in the January 29, 2005 Hattiesburg American (HA) as a way of highlighting our continuing concerns and the on-going controversies at USM resulting from decisions by the Thames Administration.

Selected quotes from the 1-29-05 HA about the special 1-28-05 meeting of the Faculty Senate:

"We had a good conversation about concerns faculty had," Beckett said. (David Beckett is president of the Faculty Senate)

But Thames, reached by telephone after the meeting, said Southern Miss is moving forward and he won't be deterred by "naysayers." ... "We are doing so many positive things at Southern Miss," Thames said. "And it is very disappointing to me that there are some who continue to have this very negative attitude and will not acknowledge the great strides we've made in enrollment, federal funding, private support and campus wide growth, synergy and community involvement." Asked what might be at the core of faculty members' criticisms, Thames said he didn't know. Instead he urged faculty members to consider if they are better off now - if they make more money - than before he was named president in April 2002. "If they would just ask those questions then I think they're going to find out they're better off than they were three years ago," Thames said. ... "I am not looking back," Thames said. "I am taking note of what has occurred in the past and I am moving forward. This university is moving forward."

As faculty senators, we believe the points below from the current fiscal year demonstrate that our university is not moving forward under the Thames Administration.

1. SACS placed USM on probation in December 2004. The Thames Administration was aware of SACS concerns for two years but apparently did not act on them. Thus, the accreditation of the university is threatened, and the probation is likely to have a negative effect on student recruitment.
2. The Thames Administration prepared plans for an extensive renovation to the top floor of the new Gulf Park Library Building to change this space to host an Executive MBA (EMBA) program and perhaps other similar programs. The renovation plan was created with virtually no input from Gulf Park faculty and it eliminates much of the study space for students. There is no EMBA program on the books, and College of Business Administration faculty members were apparently not aware of the plan to develop an EMBA.
3. The Thames Administration issued written reprimands to the two Faculty Senators who recently discovered the library renovation plan and the EMBA development plan. The ill-advised and hastily written reprimands contained incorrect statements and were subsequently withdrawn, but the chilling effect on faculty will remain.
4. The Chief Operating Officer (COO) and the Customer Services director at Gulf Park invaded a faculty member's classrooms without a prior meeting or discussion. The COO later berated the faculty member in the hallway. In addition, another administrator released inaccurate information about this matter in a forum where the faculty member was not present and unable to challenge the information.
5. The Thames Administration released a "draft" strategic plan that was a top down document involving virtually no front-end faculty input even though broad based input is an essential requirement for SACS accreditation. The Administration's draft strategic plan contained very few important priorities of faculty and departments. Now the Administration appears to be seeking input after the fact.
6. University counsel first summarily dismissed a very good post tenure review policy that was the result of four years of conscientious and collaborative work by Faculty Senators and previous administrators. When the Faculty Senate leadership took strong exception to this action, the Thames Administration engaged in hurried negotiations with representatives of Faculty Senate. However, the Thames Administration then submitted a post-tenure review policy to the Board of Trustees without providing time for Faculty Senate representatives to review fully a hard copy of the policy or share it with the full Faculty Senate. These hurried negotiations followed by a semester the decision of the Thames Administration to report to the Board of Trustees that twenty tenured faculty were performing unsatisfactorily simply because they had an unsatisfactory rating in one category of evaluation.
7. The Customer Service Unit on the Gulf Park Campus changed enrollment caps for certain courses without informing the instructor of record or department chair until after the fact. These increases have the potential to compromise academic quality.
8. The Thames Administration announced it was canceling sabbatical leaves for 2005-2006 because of budget concerns. The Administration subsequently announced it was rescinding the cancellations. This pattern of announcing one thing one week and then announcing something different later is also evident from other bullets in this list.
9. The Thames Administration returned the individual who was blamed for the enrollment reporting fiasco in fall 2003 to a position she held at the time of the scandal. (Although the President touted spring 2005 enrollment gains, enrollment data show an increase of just over one-half of one percent, a figure that might accurately be described as level.)
10. In the HA article, the President describe as "naysayers" those who are willing to state publicly legitimate concerns and then accused them of being faculty "who continue to have this very negative attitude." These statements seem fully consistent with invading classrooms of faculty and issuing ill

advised reprimands and completely inconsistent with the free exchanges of ideas one expects at a modern university.

11. The Thames Administration's Chief Fiscal Officer (CFO) accused units of being "inefficient" and "hoarding money" simply because the units carried over unspent dollars from one fiscal year to the next. These units believed they were being efficient when they saved money and were planning wisely for a longer term rather than "hoarding" resources. A probable outcome from the resource grab that the CFO has been discussing are "spend it or lose it" practices and "if you didn't spend it you don't need it" mindsets that undermine solid fiscal policies.

12. Over two hundred faculty members have left the university during the last two years, including many who had devoted years of their professional lives to serving students and USM. These departures have dramatically affected academic programs and compromised the ability of the University to meet the needs of students.

The points above are representative of many others that might have been listed. Moving forward requires assessing the past, understanding concerns, and acting upon that assessment and those concerns in constructive, collaborative, and respectful ways that assure forward progress. Repeating a line from the Hattiesburg American (01-29-05) article, "Asked what might be at the core of faculty members' criticisms, Thames said he didn't know." Dr. Thames also declared (HA 02-04-05) that he is "having more fun than ever." USM deserves an administration that does know what the issues are and is more concerned about those it serves than it is about having fun. USM faculty members are greatly concerned about the needs of our students and the future of our University. We believe we need a change of leadership to move forward and therefore respectfully request that the Board of Trustees begin the search process that will result in a new president.

ON BEHALF OF THE USM FACULTY SENATE,

Signed, Faculty Senate Executive Committee:
David Beckett, President
William Powell, President-Elect
Mary Beth Applin, Secretary
Bonnie Harbaugh, Secretary-Elect