

12-9-2004

Faculty Senate Position Statement on the Gulf Coast Incident

USM Faculty Senate

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Recommended Citation

USM Faculty Senate, "Faculty Senate Position Statement on the Gulf Coast Incident" (2004). *Faculty Senate Resolutions*. Paper 23.
http://aquila.usm.edu/faculty_senate_resolutions/23

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Statement Concerning Gulf Coast Incident (12/09/04)

The Faculty Senate of The University of Southern Mississippi is very concerned about events originating on October 12, 2004 at the Gulf Coast Campus involving faculty member Diane Stevenson and the following USM administrators: Dean Elliott Pood, Dr. David Wheeler; Dr. Kenneth Malone and Mr. Richard Farley. The primary concerns, observations, and conclusions of the Faculty Senate are summarized in the position statement below.

FACULTY SENATE CONCERNS AND OBSERVATIONS

1. At any university, faculty must have the freedom to discuss in the classroom university related issues that affect the delivery of instruction to students. They may do so without permission, intrusion or interference from members of the administration.

Observations on Point One:

a. It is inappropriate for any administrator to try to prevent a faculty member from discussing modes of instruction with students in the classroom.

b. Dr. Stevenson has made it clear that she was discussing the future emphasis the University intends to give on-line instruction at USM Gulf Coast. She states that her comments to students were fully consistent with quotes attributed to Provost Grimes in an 11-04-04 Hattiesburg American story.

2. Faculty should be treated with professionalism and courtesy, and they should be informed of an administrative action that is being contemplated before that action occurs. In emergency situations, there may not be time to adhere to the normal protocols. But even then, protocols should be honored if there is time to do so.

Observations on Point Two:

a. The ill-advised interventions by non-academic administrators departed from the standard practice of having academic administrators--chairs, deans, and the provost--deal with matters involving faculty members. If Dr. Wheeler (chair of the Department of English) or Dean Pood wanted to converse with Dr. Stevenson, then they should have set up a meeting with Dr. Stevenson at a mutually convenient time. Simply put, no emergency was associated with the October 12 events, and time was not of the essence. But professional courtesy is always timely and to be expected.

b. The visits of Dr. Malone and Mr. Richard Farley to two of Dr. Stevenson's classes without prior conversations with Dr. Stevenson represent serious lapses in professional judgment, common courtesy, and normal practices.

c. In this non-emergency situation, the failures of administrators to arrange a meeting with Dr. Stevenson and to take the appropriate time to obtain complete and correct information about the October 12 events represent serious lapses of judgment that should be avoided in the future.

3. Administrators should not make unsubstantiated allegations against faculty in any forum. Faculty members have a right to respond to allegations made against them, and all administrators should be sure that personnel matters that involve allegations are handled in professional ways and according to University policies.

Observation on Point Three:

a. At least one senior administrator (Dean Pood) made inaccurate statements and refutable allegations against Dr. Stevenson in a public forum. She had no opportunity to address these allegations. This type of behavior is inappropriate and falls well below what is to be expected from academic leaders.

FACULTY SENATE CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above points and observations, the Faculty Senate requests that the administrators involved apologize to Dr. Diane Stevenson for the numerous inaccurate public comments and unsupported statements made about her, for the discourtesies she endured, and for the unprofessional manner in which she and her students were treated in both action and speech.

We also request that the Provost notify the university's deans, as well as the administrators involved in this incident, that the standard practice of having academic administrators deal with matters involving faculty members should have been followed, and stipulate that such a practice will be followed in the future. The immediate supervisor of the faculty member, usually a department chair, should be the initial person to contact a faculty member concerning a possible controversy.