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Open Letter to President Thames

USM Faculty Senate

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The University of Southern Mississippi Faculty Senate



Overview. The faculty of The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) is dedicated to the welfare of the university and to the education of its students. As its no confidence vote clearly conveys, the faculty has deep concerns about decisions and practices of the Thames administration that are affecting the University in adverse ways. Members of the Faculty Senate are the elected representatives of USM faculty, and after due deliberation, the Senate voted 41-1 to submit an open letter to President Thames as a way of restating our concerns to him and sharing those concerns with the public.

An Open Letter to President Shelby Thames from the USM Faculty Senate

President Thames, USM has been repeatedly plagued by unrest and conflict throughout your two-year tenure as president. Contrary to good practice and all precedent, now you have initiated termination proceedings against two distinguished tenured faculty members, Dr. Frank Glamser and Dr. Gary Stringer. Your decision, made without any input from the respective chairs, the dean, or the provost is virtually without parallel at America's best universities.

Recently, you have expressed public outrage that Drs. Glamser and Stringer prefer a confidential appeal before the University Advisory Committee (UAC), even though the current *Faculty Handbook* states, "The proceedings of the University Advisory Committee are strictly confidential . . ." President Thames, you have claimed this requirement does not apply when the president of the university is the instigator of the dismissal hearings. There is no language in the *Faculty Handbook* that would suggest that UAC hearings are anything other than confidential, nor is there language exempting you from this confidentiality requirement.

You have publicly accused Drs. Glamser and Stringer of "robbing the university, students, and faculty of the truth" when they are actually following the *Faculty Handbook* policy. (Ironically, you have operated your administration behind a wall of secrecy and have made a habit of surprise pronouncements to faculty and staff.) You are the accuser, and through a media blitz apparently designed to sabotage the confidential and impartial personnel hearing mandated by the USM *Faculty Handbook*, you are assuming the roles of prosecutor, jury, and judge as well. We believe that Mississippians will agree with us that what you are doing undermines justice and is wholly inappropriate.

Within a week, an overwhelming number of faculty voted no confidence in your presidency: a 40-0 vote by members of the Faculty Senate on March 7, 2004, and a 430-32 by 70% of the full faculty on March 10. The votes of no confidence were not solely a result of your actions against two distinguished professors with 56 years of combined service at USM. Rather, the collapse of faculty confidence in your presidency reflects alarm about two-years of ill-conceived decisions and management practices, several of which we highlight here.

- Filling virtually all top administrative positions without faculty and staff input and without national searches that are commonplace at America's best universities;
- Implementing an invasive technology policy that allows seizure and impoundment (for any reason!) of computers used in faculty offices;
- Implementing a massive college reorganization without any consultation with faculty and staff;
- Dismissing college deans in an exceedingly disrespectful manner;

- Thrusting an ill-conceived Faculty Activity Report (FAR) on faculty (though departments and colleges already had rigorous annual faculty performance reviews), then assuring one set of purposes for the FAR, but stating later that it would be used for an expanded set of purposes (for which it is poorly suited);
- Hiring a new lawyer at \$140,000 to be "risk manager" when the University already had (and has) a full-time legal counsel;
- Dismissing a valued colleague who had been assured by the previous administration that he had tenure when he was appointed;
- Creating a separate university awards committee that undermines the long-standing and well-respected Faculty Senate awards committee (and without any prior conversation with the Faculty Senate);
- Releasing an ill-conceived drug and alcohol policy without input from faculty and staff (the policy was subsequently withdrawn because of legitimate concerns about specific areas of content);
- Reporting inflated enrollments to the Board of Trustees and then blaming one individual for the fiasco;
- Surprising members of the Board of Trustees by announcing that USM would establish a teaching hospital in Gulfport, then hiring an administrator to oversee the teaching hospital initiative shortly after the announcement;
- Giving "stealth raises" of more than eleven percent to selected administrators in the second semester of 2003 while all but a few faculty and staff received just two percent raises;
- Giving sizable salary increases to selected administrators and faculty members in January 2004 without following established *Faculty Handbook* processes;
- Removing abruptly the academic leadership from the Gulf Coast campus, leaving students, faculty, and staff in a state of uncertainty, as well as apprehensive that an imposed, highly centralized management approach will erode progress and the ability of the Coast Campus to serve constituents effectively;
- Deciding to close the USM Van Hook golf course without any input from faculty, staff, or the public;
- Sanctioning an investigation into the credentials of the Vice President for Research and Economic Development by the "risk manager," a long-time close associate of this Vice President, rather than by University Counsel or some other party with professional distance from the Vice President;
- Initiating termination proceedings against two respected senior professors based on an "investigation" conducted by the same close associate to the Vice President for Research and Economic Development who had conducted the administration's "inquiry" into the credentials of the Vice President;
- Using heavy-handed tactics in locking the two senior professors out of their offices and seizing at least one computer;
- Attacking, in personal and public ways, faculty and others who have raised legitimate questions about the practices of this administration.
- Creating an environment so negative that significant numbers of respected and experienced colleagues are choosing to leave the University.

President Thames, we remind you that your unilateral approaches to dealing with major issues of the University in academic year 2002-2003 caused a virtual meltdown in communication between you and the Faculty Senate. In an April 2003 meeting, the Faculty Senate overwhelmingly passed a resolution asking that the Senate and administration agree on a facilitator to help reopen meaningful dialogue. When you declined to participate in facilitated discussion, members of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee tried to keep doors

open for conversation. For a while it appeared as if progress was being made. But that was an illusion, for you continue to govern by surprise, by edicts, and by intimidation.

Members of the Faculty Senate have made a good faith and honorable effort to communicate with you and your administration. However, after two years of avoidable controversies at USM for which your administration must take responsibility, we are completely convinced that the overwhelming votes of no confidence in your presidency are fully justified. We regret the need to air our views through an open letter, but it is one of only a few options by which we can share our perspectives on your presidency with the public we serve.