

# *Special Report*

## **Does Martha Saunders Think Faculty Have Glamour Jobs? A Look at Saunders' Views on Tenure and Organizational Conflict**

USM President Martha Saunders' [8-April-08 blog](#) about the meaning of academic tenure was one for the ages. In that blog entitled "2 Events," which is inserted below, Saunders states that "[t]enure is probably one of the most misunderstood aspects of the academic world."

### **2 Events**

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Although it was nice to spend a long weekend in a place where there were no phones, automobiles or shopping malls, I was glad to get back to the real world yesterday. I do miss the internet when it's not available to me.

My schedule today includes the first of several Centennial Campus Conclaves. Faculty, staff and students are invited to share ideas and recommendations for our upcoming 100th birthday in 2010.

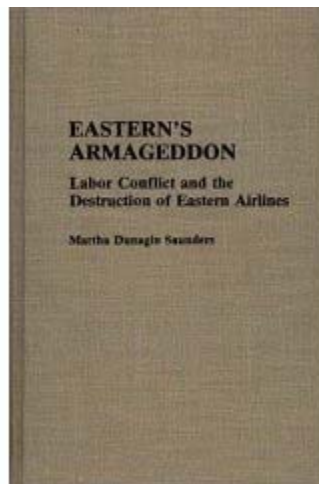
Also, I'll be hearing a report from the Provost about this year's tenure and promotion decisions. Tenure is probably one of the most misunderstood aspects of the academic world. Put simply, it is conferred upon a faculty member after the longest (6 years) and most rigorous probation period of any employee group. Tenure confers an expectation of employment for an indefinite period that may not be terminated by the employer except for good cause. It differs very little from the same privileges in other public and private sectors.

Any time an academic or non-academic sees a phrase like the one quoted above, the focus (on the matter at hand) intensifies. The same is true in this case. And, Saunders does not disappoint -- she follows up the first statement with an explanation of what she means by it. There she states: "Tenure confers an expectation of employment for an indefinite period that may not be terminated by the employer except for good cause." According to sources, many people would not argue with Saunders. That is, not until one gets to the final piece of her explanation: "[Tenure] differs very little from the same privileges in other public and private sectors."

To understand why Saunders' final statement is arguable, recall the various letters to the editor of *The Hattiesburg American* that were written by Thames supporters during the tumultuous USM Presidency of Shelby Thames (2002-07). In many of these letters USM faculty were called (paraphrasing) lazy, fat cat country clubbers who were, protected by tenure, unwilling to work hard, which (work hard) is all Thames wanted them to do. Most people, according to sources, understand that if tenure differed very little from the same privileges enjoyed by workers in the private sector(s), then workers in the private sector(s) wouldn't speak of academic tenure with such venom, as so many in the Pine Belt area did during the Thames reign. It's because of tenure that higher education is so often referred to as a recession-proof industry. It's because of tenure that many academicians are willing to forgo (or leave behind) higher paying jobs in the private sector(s).

In reading Saunders' final statement, it's as if she's never heard of "at-will" employment law, which governs the employment of so many people in the U.S. private sector(s). In these cases, employers are free, outside of discrimination (race, gender, etc.), etc., to discharge employees for any (or no) cause. What we get from Saunders, at least given that she didn't explain her final sentence very thoroughly, is, according to sources, either a lack of understanding of the meaning of "tenure" or a lack of understanding of the meaning of "good cause," or both.

Perhaps some of the missing links come back around through Saunders' 1992 book, *Eastern's Armageddon: Labor Conflict and the Destruction of Eastern Airlines* (Greenwood Press).



Below is Saunders' description of the book (found at amazon.com):

### **Book Description**

This book examines the escalation of an organizational conflict to one of the most talked about industrial crises of the past decade: the demise of Eastern Airlines. Through an analysis of the messages exchanged by some of its key participants--the representatives of the pilots and management of Eastern--this study attempts to explain how and why some 4,000 men and women walked away from high-paying glamour jobs and toppled an institution. The book is not an evaluation of the economic climate or financial events that put Eastern into a critical bind; instead, it is an analysis of the human cost of an organizational tragedy that might possibly have been avoided. The results of the study support communication theory that predicts that when an agitative group bearing the characteristics of the pilots of Eastern Airlines conflicts with an establishment such as Eastern's management under Frank Lorenzo, the establishment can always successfully avoid or suppress agitative movements. This work will be of interest to scholars and practitioners in industrial relations, labor-management studies, corporate communication, and American industrial history.

There are at least a couple of interesting statements above. Let's start with the aim of the book: "[T]his study attempts to explain how and why some 4,000 men and women walked away from high-paying glamour jobs and toppled an institution." Does Saunders reveal a bias from the start? Like the "Company Man," EFIB Chair George Carter, is Saunders automatically on the side of the institution, whether that be Eastern Airlines or USM, and not on the side of the employees? Is the phrase "high-paying glamour jobs" another indication of Saunders' pro-management bias? Is the sub-phrase "glamour jobs" a scientific one? Is Saunders a scientist?

The second statement relevant to this report concerns the results of the study (i.e., Saunders' book). That is: "The results of the study support communication theory that predicts that when an agitative group bearing the characteristics of the pilots of Eastern Airlines conflicts with an establishment such as Eastern's management under Frank Lorenzo, the establishment can always successfully avoid or suppress agitative movements." In Saunders' eyes, is any grievance by employees an "agitative movement" that needs to be "suppressed" in order to preserve the institution? Does the character/integrity (or lack thereof) of the institution matter at all? Has Saunders' research program been, like sources say CoB management professor Stephen Bushardt's has been to him, simply a platform for espousing her views about how the "culture" inside an academic institution should be maintained?

According to sources, someone needs to ask Saunders a probing question, and then let her provide a thorough answer to it. That question: "President Saunders, what do you think about what former USM professors Frank Glamser and Gary Stringer did when they were investigated the credentials of former USM Vice

President Dvorak, and what do you think about how former USM President Shelby Thames handled that situation?"