

Dr. Martha Dunagin Saunders

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA



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Martha Dunagin Saunders, Ph.D. is the sixth President of the University of West Florida.

In her 30-plus years in higher education, Dr. Saunders has served in academic and leadership roles at universities in Florida, Georgia, Wisconsin and Mississippi. Her area of academic expertise is in public relations and crisis communication for which she has won numerous awards, including two coveted Silver Anvils from the Public Relations Society of America.

Under her leadership, the University of West Florida has transformed into a first-choice institution.

She led UWF to its status as a top-performing public university in the Florida Board of Governors performance-based funding metrics for three consecutive years. The University also ranked among the top 15 public regional institutions in the South in the 2020 U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges and was named a “Great College to Work For” by ModernThink and featured in The Chronicle of Higher Education.

She established the state’s first doctoral program in intelligent systems and robotics in partnership with the Florida Institute of Human Machine Cognition. She also oversaw the development of Florida’s first bachelor’s in cybersecurity degree program designated as a National Center of Academic Excellence by the National Security Agency and U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

As provost and executive vice president for UWF, Dr. Saunders established the Division of Student Affairs and Academic Engagement and the Center for Cybersecurity. Equity and diversity initiatives launched under her guidance propelled the institution to receive the Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award from INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine four times. She also led the reorganization of the institution's colleges and guided the establishment of two new named colleges—the Usha Kundu, MD College of Health and the Hal Marcus College of Science and Engineering.

Dr. Saunders' vision is for UWF to grow beyond its beginnings as a regional comprehensive university and receive recognition as a leader in innovation and cutting-edge academic programs.

As an entrepreneurial leader, Dr. Saunders is passionate about creating innovative solutions for the dynamic challenges facing higher education. As a change maker, she drives action behind these solutions, propelling higher education into the future.

Dr. Saunders earned a bachelor's degree in French from the University of Southern Mississippi, a master's degree in journalism from the University of Georgia and a doctorate in communication theory and research from Florida State University.

When Dr. Saunders is not attending to University needs, she and her husband, Joe Bailey, can be found walking, shelling, gardening, kayaking or fishing on her beloved Pensacola Beach.



Subject-Matter Areas of Expertise



LEADING THE WAY FOR INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- We're not alone in feeling the pressure right now—colleges and universities across the United States are being called to innovate, improve service to industries and adapt to changing student demands. But we do feel like we've stepped into a unique position in our response—the establishment of a new entity, UWF Innovation Institute. Instead of only seeing the challenges we might face, we're using the pressure to think outside of the box and drive institutional transformation at UWF and across Florida.
- UWF's Innovation Network will accelerate all ideas and initiatives related to cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing and intelligent systems and robotics, establishing an atmosphere for thought leadership and innovation throughout Northwest Florida with an anchor at UWF.

REIMAGINING THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- As President, I'm asking myself and other University leaders big questions to drive our future vision:
 - › What does the next 20 years of higher education look like?
 - › Why does higher education need to change and what do universities have to do to adapt to the disrupters?
 - › How do you find room for innovation within a traditional university structure?

INTEGRATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- We're playing an active role in the region's economic growth through our partnerships with local businesses.
- Our focus on in-demand industries is adding value to the University and the community. For example, we used our position as the leading higher education institution in Northwest Florida to enact positive change through the development of the Sea3D Additive Manufacturing Laboratory.

CYBERSECURITY AND “CYBER COAST”

- In the fall of 2018, I was able to witness UWF becoming the first University in Florida to offer a stand-alone bachelor’s degree in cybersecurity designated by the National Security Agency and Department of Homeland Security as a National Center of Excellence in Cyber Defense.
- UWF is one of nine Centers of Academic Excellence regional resource centers in the U.S., providing leadership to advance cyber defense education among colleges and universities in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Puerto Rico and South Carolina.
- With world-class students, leading experts in the field and statewide partnerships, we’re building a thriving cybersecurity workforce that enhances innovation, economic development and technology infrastructure.

SOLVING REGIONAL PROBLEMS WITH EDUCATION

- UWF is dedicated to listening to the needs of the community.
- In the fall of 2019, UWF’s Emerald Coast location will offer a bachelor’s in communication, adhering to industry demands in the Fort Walton Beach area. Emerald Coast will now have a total of 11 degree programs.
- We are adding three more programs to the mix at UWF’s Pensacola campus: a master’s in engineering, a master’s in cybersecurity and a bachelor’s in instructional design and technology.

UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP MODEL

- At the University of West Florida, we see ourselves as much more than an institution of higher education. We’re a central hub for the Northwest Florida region, with the resources, expertise and initiative needed to drive educational, cultural and economic partnerships that make an impact far beyond our campus.
- Universities and communities thrive when they work together to accomplish mutual goals. This is why we’ve made “Community and Economic Engagement” one of the five key directions in our strategic plan. In a University-community partnership model, everyone wins.
- UWF is expanding its presence in downtown Pensacola and Fort Walton Beach by creating “living learning labs” that will enhance collaborations between K-12 programs, state colleges, private businesses, the military, early learning programs and more.
- We’re showing this in action through our partnerships with area schools to infuse STEM education in K-12 classrooms through different programs such as [Cybersecurity Ambassadors](#).
- The UWF Historic Trust embodies the University’s vision for community partnership and a living learning community, focusing on preserving, interpreting and sharing the rich history of Northwest Florida to give tourists a reason to visit and residents even more reason to stay. A lot of you may not know that UWF Historic Trust’s properties include two graduate student residence halls downtown. These fully restored residence halls allow students to immerse themselves in the downtown historic atmosphere.

STUDENT SUCCESS & CAREER READINESS

- We want to know how to best prepare our students to face the challenges and demands of a 21st century global society. This generation of students must work together on solutions for climate change, water pollution, income inequality, terrorism, racism and world hunger. We talk about making students “career ready”—prepared and able to collaboratively tackle the big issues. But what does that really mean?
- The UWF Career Development and Community Engagement department serves as the point of contact for students and area businesses interested in establishing an internship or co-op. Staff members consult with employers to develop an appropriate model that benefits the company and students.
- UWF’s Career Development and Community Engagement office uses the career development model of explore, discover, prepare and implement, encouraging students to gain a diverse set of abilities by participating in active learning methods. Through each phase, active and experiential learning strategies such as intensive writing courses, undergraduate research, service-learning, living-learning communities, internships and job shadowing, are incorporated and highly encouraged.

DIVERSITY IN HIGHER ED

- The office promotes the principles of awareness, acceptance and respect as a way of life at the University of West Florida.
- UWF has won the Higher Education Excellence in Diversity award from INSIGHT into Diversity magazine three years in a row.
- The University has a diversity plan that has been implemented campuswide.
- The University has a Chief Diversity Officer who works with my Council on Diversity and Inclusion, which is comprised of members of both the campus and Pensacola communities.



ENDORSEMENTS

- “This is not her first rodeo,” Mort O’Sullivan said after the ceremony. “What she did and showed in the two and a half years that she was here on her return before her election clearly demonstrated she’s fully capable of leading this university.”
 - › [Source](#)
- “You can tell the difference between platitudes and sincerity and Martha is definitely sincere when she talks about the community,” Kevin Bailey said. “Martha genuinely cares about the people and place and the students.”
 - › [Source](#)

HONORS & AWARDS

- Miami Herald’s 50 Influential Floridians, 2019
- Hattiesburg (MS) Public Schools Hall of Fame, 2018
- Inweekly (Pensacola) Power List (2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014)
- Citizen of the Year 2016, Rotary Club of Gulf Breeze
- Rotary International Paul Harris Fellow, 2017
- 50 Top Business Women in Mississippi, Class of 2012
- National Stevie Award for Women in Business, 2011
- National winner, Silver Anvil Award, Public Relations Society of America for campaign to enrich the brand of a research university, 2011
- Alumni Hall of Fame, University of Southern Mississippi, 2010
- The Hub Award (City of Hattiesburg), 2010
- Chi Omega Fraternity, Roselyn Dabbs Outstanding Alumna, 2008
- Woman of Excellence Award, Diabetes Foundation of MS, Inc., 2008
- University of West Florida Distinguished Service Award, 1996
- National winner, Silver Anvil Award, Public Relations Society of America for “Just 2 It!” public safety campaign, 1994
- Florida Teaching Incentive Program (TIP) Award, 1994
- Invited faculty, The Florida State University’s London Study Center, Fall Semesters 1992 and 1993
- Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching and Advising Award, University of West Florida, 1992
- Distinguished Teaching Award, University of West Florida, 1992
- Golden Apple Award for Teaching Excellence, Escambia County [FL] Foundation for Excellence, 1991

Presidential Accomplishments

- Move from the bottom to the top - BOG metrics (last 2 years)
- Strengthened presence in the region with downtown Pensacola and Fort Walton.
- Led 50th anniversary celebration.
- Launched Reubin O'D. Askew Institute for Multidisciplinary Studies.
- Launched Division of Research and Strategic Innovation.
- Sponsored the Next Big Thing initiatives.
- National merit scholars.
- First Ph.D.
- First named department.
- Named the College of Health.

Media Coverage

- Northwest Florida Daily News
- Pensacola News Journal
- News Wise
- Florida Trend
- Evollution
- American Towns
- In Weekly
- WUWF
- Capitol Soup
- WEAR Channel 3
- University Industry Innovation Network
- Northwest Florida Business Climate Magazine
- Emerald Coast Magazine
- Diverse: Issues in Higher Education
- 850 Magazine
- Inside Higher Ed



Scholarly & Professional Activities



BOOKS & BOOK CHAPTERS

Saunders, M.D. (2015) *The Southern Miss Story: Enriching the Brand of a Research University Through a Centennial Campaign*. In D.D. Warrick/Jens Mueller *Learning from Real World Cases - Lessons in Changing Cultures* (pp. 65-75). Oxford, UK: RossiSmith Academic Publishing.

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Saunders, M. & Northrup, P. (2016/01/15). *Innovating on the Margins: Transforming Higher Education by Working from the Outside In*. *The evollution: A Destiny Solutions Illumination*. Retrieved from <http://evollution.com/author/martha-saunders/>.

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Saunders, M.D. and Jones, B.A. (Spring 2007). *Four "C's" of Service to Students with Disabilities*. *Leadership Exchange* (5), 11-13.

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Saunders, M.D. & Perrigo, E. (1998). Negotiation as a model for teaching public relations. Journalism Educator 52 (4), 57-65.

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TELEVISION DOCUMENTARIES

Saunders, M.D. & Gershon, P. (Scriptwriters) (1994). Southern Voices, Southern Words. Broadcast on PBS, February, 1994. *First Place winner, Video Documentary, 1994, National Honorary Broadcast Society.*

MAJOR COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

Saunders, M.D. (2007 - 2010). (Campaign Director). "The Southern Miss Story: Enriching the Brand of a Research University Through A Centennial Celebration." National winner, Silver Anvil Award, Public Relations Society of America 2011.

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PUBLISHED SPEECHES

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Anthologized in Personal Excellence (December 1996).

Anthologized in Carlin, D.P. & Payne, J. (1998) Public Speaking Today, NTC Publishing.

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