

A Program Saved by Community Funded Partnering

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Objectives

After attending this session, the participant will:

1. Identify the conditions that led to the decision to close the ULM MLS program.
2. Summarize the events that resulted in the reversal of the decision to close the ULM MLS program.
3. Explore strategies for maintaining the viability of university-based MLS programs.

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SAVING THE ULM MLS PROGRAM—PART I

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On October 30, 2013, administrators at the University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM) informed the Medical Laboratory Science faculty the program would be terminated due to severe budget cuts. Faculty and students joined in the seemingly impossible task of saving the program. Momentum grew when the local medical laboratory community became involved. A grassroots effort from medical laboratory scientists throughout the state of Louisiana erupted within weeks.

When administrators informed faculty of their decision to ax the program, program director Debbie Wisner offered several well stated objections concerning the importance of the program in the community and its excellent outcomes. The vice president said the decision was made and could not be reversed.

After the meeting Debbie emailed both clinical affiliate representatives and students in the MLS program to request emergency meetings with each group over the next two days. University administrators attended the meeting with students. The primary purpose of the student meeting was to assure students they would be taken care of and students in the program would be given the opportunity to graduate. The meeting became emotionally charged, however, as students made eloquent, passionate appeals to university administrators. Debbie requested medical laboratory scientists at the affiliates meeting to join faculty and students in trying to persuade university administrators to rescind their decision.

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ASCLS Today Saving the Program (2)

The day of the student meeting a ULM MLS graduate posted a heartfelt plea to the community via Facebook to write ULM administrators and local legislators stating the importance of the medical laboratory science profession and the program at ULM. The post rapidly went viral and spawned many letters from faculty, MLS graduates, students, laboratory managers, and local medical laboratory scientists.

Debbie wrote a letter to university administrators detailing the importance of the ULM MLS program to healthcare and the community and the program's excellent outcomes. She reminded them of ULM's agreement with St. Francis Medical Center in Monroe who had a hospital-based program for more than 50 years and relinquished it to support the university-based program at ULM.

The Louisiana State Society for Clinical Laboratory Science (LSCS) president sent a letter to LSCS members informing them of the closure, asking them to contact ULM administrators and government officials. Concerned students, faculty, laboratory professionals, friends and family members throughout the state wrote more letters and visited physicians and government officials.

Five days following the news, MLS faculty met with ULM's vice president of academic affairs and drove him to St. Francis Medical Center to tour the laboratory. Faculty believed they could persuade the vice president by showing him the complexity and importance of what medical laboratory scientists do. He seemed impressed and said he would give some thought to the decision but made no promises. Three days later MLS faculty met with ULM's president to appeal. Given no hope, faculty were resigned to the inevitable and resolved to see current students through but no more.

The annual ULM MLS Advisory Committee meeting took place January 10, 2014. During the meeting Debbie told committee members the decision to close the MLS program stood after numerous appeals. Debbie stated the plan was to ensure students currently in the program graduated and that she had sent NAACLS documentation about the closure. An advisory committee member stated we should move forward with the appeal. She suggested the committee contact members of the Board of Regents (BOR). A second committee member agreed but warned the information presented to the BOR must have impact.

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ASCLS Today Saving the Program (3)

Another rally ensued. ULM MLS Advisory Committee members and other interested individuals formed the Medical Laboratory Coalition of Northeast Louisiana. Several individuals of the coalition, two MLS faculty members, and the LSCS president attended the BOR meeting January 22. Everyone except faculty spoke to the BOR, stating the importance of the ULM MLS program and requesting time to garner financial support from regional healthcare entities. A request from Monroe stated the people from northeast Louisiana are unique in that we live in our region primarily because we are born and reared here. We do not attract individuals from other parts of the state or from out of state to come to this area to work, especially in rural areas. The board voted unanimously to defer the request of termination of the B.S. in Medical Laboratory Science at the University of Louisiana at Monroe for 60 days until the March BOR meeting so advocates could organize a specific proposal to keep the program viable.

The ULM vice president of academic affairs requested that MLS faculty identify possible partners willing to contribute funds to retain the program. Faculty and coalition members contacted hospital administrators who met with ULM administrators to discuss a possible partnership.

Initially, there was very little interest because the larger hospitals and corporations felt that the \$300K requested by ULM was more than they could afford to pay. But rural hospital administrators, concerned about the impact the program's closure would have on them, obtained support from rural hospitals and then went back to the larger hospitals to ask them to join.

Two rural hospital administrators and a pathologist who consults for rural hospital laboratories made incredible efforts to gather support. Eleven entities formed a corporate endeavor. Each entity pledged to donate \$1250 per month for two years. One of the rural hospital administrators, a ULM faculty member and a representative of the coalition spoke at the BOR meeting March 26, asking that time be granted to obtain the additional funding required by ULM.

ULM administrators required at least \$328,500 per year be pledged, for two years, before they would request the University of Louisiana System Board of Supervisors to rescind the termination approval from December 2013. Additional entities donated money, and ULM requested the UL Board of Supervisors rescind the termination of the program at the April BOR meeting.

The program is currently viable and ULM administrators are supportive. Student numbers are gradually increasing due to the newly launched online MLT to MLS bridge program and enhanced recruiting.

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STAYING ALIVE

Recruitment is something all medical laboratory science educators know we need to do better and more frequently. At the beginning of each academic year, we discuss this in our faculty meetings. The topic usually arises at advisory committee meetings and at state and national professional organization meetings. More than once our program director has stated we will focus on recruitment efforts the coming year.

Then during the year, a major detractor occurs. One year our building flooded, and we had to move all our laboratory equipment, supplies, office contents, etc. to another building and operate in a less than ideal environment. The following year we had a new faculty member with no teaching experience who needed mentoring. That same year we encountered numerous student problems, requiring student conferences, suspensions, and one dismissal. These situations drain time, energy and productivity. The year after that there was another major upheaval and health challenges with faculty. The next year university administrators decided to close the program due to small numbers of students and a budget crisis. Fortunately, the program was saved and money was pledged to support it for two years from community partners until the program could become self-sustaining.

Recruitment moved up on our priority list. We identified four target populations for recruitment efforts: an online MLT to MLS online bridge program that would launch the following year, ULM students majoring in pre-medical laboratory science, pre-pharmacy, toxicology, and biology, students taking science courses at a local community college, local high school students.

We worked to develop online courses for the bridge program and collaborated with university personnel responsible for The University of Louisiana Monroe's online degree program, eULM, to advertise the program and recruit students. We offered our first classes in the fall 2015 semester. Information about the bridge program is available at <http://www.ulm.edu/mls/bridge/index.html>.

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ASCLS Today Staying Alive (2)

Each semester we offer the course Medical Laboratory Principles and Methods to introduce students to the profession. Pre-medical laboratory science students are required to take the course, but it is available to any ULM student. Students perform laboratory activities in the various disciplines each week and tour a hospital laboratory at the end of the semester. Our youngest faculty member, Jessica Lasiter, teaches the course. She creates a fun learning environment and works to develop a relationship with each student. This course has proven successful in both retaining pre-MLS students and in obtaining students from other majors.

Although our students are officially advised by the Student Success Center at ULM, we believe it is important to establish and maintain contact with pre-MLS students to ensure they are taking the correct courses and to keep them interested in medical laboratory science. Jessica contacts each pre-MLS student each semester for an advising appointment. In addition, our program director emails information about our program, including application deadlines, to students majoring in pre-pharmacy, biology and toxicology.

ULM MLS faculty arranged with biology and chemistry faculty at a local community college to present the video "I Am a Medical Laboratory Scientist" available on the ASCLS website. We followed the video with a brief description of the profession and answered questions. The faculty from the community college was willing to allow us to come because we took only approximately 15 minutes of time. ULM and the community college developed an articulation agreement for students earning an Associate of Biological Sciences to transfer to ULM to complete a Bachelor of Science degree in Medical Laboratory Science.

Faculty made similar presentations in chemistry and biology classes and at student organization meetings, including the Biology Club, at ULM. In addition, faculty set up information booths with a colorful display of photographs of students in the medical laboratory at college and career fairs on the ULM campus and at other college and university campuses.

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ASCLS Today Saving the Program (3)

In 2014-2015 MLS faculty and second year professional students visited several local high schools to promote medical laboratory science. We facilitated a non-biohazardous hands-on case study highlighting the profession of medical laboratory science in biology classes. Teachers were happy to allow us to teach their classes for the day.

ULM MLS faculty work to keep both advisors and recruiters informed about our program since they interact with high school students, freshmen and sophomores more often than we do. Recruiters participated in the hands-on case study. It was an eye opening experience for them, one that gave recruiters firsthand knowledge of the medical laboratory scientist's critical role in healthcare.

A coalition of local medical laboratory scientists met in the fall of 2015 to brainstorm ideas about recruitment. Our hope is to involve practicing medical laboratory scientists, including recent graduates, in the high school recruitment efforts. The coalition is working on a "We Want You" flier sponsored by local hospitals urging students to pursue the medical laboratory profession.

Students in the ULM medical laboratory science program help with recruitment efforts. First year professional MLS students created an Instagram account to spread intriguing student laboratory pictures. They communicate with students in various majors about the profession in an informal way. Second year professional MLS students help with high school recruiting events.

Intentional recruitment is necessary if we are to survive. It is also enjoyable. However, it can be overwhelming when looked onto other responsibilities including teaching, service, scholarly activity, accreditation, etc. When the job is shared with practicing medical laboratory scientists, students, educators, business leaders, family and friends, the task becomes more manageable. It also becomes a richer, more effective, and farther reaching experience for the profession and the community.

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Excerpts from a letter written at beginning of grassroots effort

Northeast Louisiana is facing tough times in the economic arena. Our governor has made some irresponsible decisions and those have trickled down to administrators at the University of Louisiana at Monroe who have made a very poor decision that will have a far reaching negative impact on our community if it is not reversed. These administrators have chosen to eliminate the Medical Laboratory Science Program at ULM. In the reorganization structure, only one academic administrative position has been eliminated

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When my colleague Debbie Wisenor and I were informed of the closure in a meeting with administrators Wednesday, we were told the decision was made and could not be reversed. She offered several well stated objections concerning the importance of our program in the community. I did not have much to say except that ULM made a promise to St. Francis Medical Center several years ago when the university asked St. Francis to relinquish a program that had been successful for more than 50 years to support ULM in seeking accreditation and taking full responsibility for delivering the program. This bothers me for several reasons. First of all, I do not take promises lightly. Call me old-fashioned but I believe in following through with commitments. Secondly, I worked for more than 25 years at St. Francis and was the program director for the Program in Medical Technology (Medical Laboratory Science) during the transition. I helped convince a well-loved colleague and friend who was the Director of Laboratory Services at St. Francis Medical Center at that time, to support the aspiring program at ULM. I will never forget her questions during our meeting with Dean . She asked him if he was sure the administration could continue to support the program in the years to come because she did not want to close the program at St. Francis and have no way of training medical technologists if the university could not sustain support. The dean promised support. Contracts were written and signed. Debbie and I literally worked day and night, expending blood, sweat, tears and health to develop the program. While I have some regrets about working too much during those years, our graduates and outcomes testify to the excellence of this program.

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Debbie and I have been through so much adversity in developing and sustaining this program for the past six years, we really did not feel much fight left in us Wednesday after receiving the bad news. We were focused on taking care of our young colleague, Jessica Lasiter, who had just had surgery Monday and received some bad news of her own, our students, and our clinical affiliates. We had to inform each in the right sequence, do the best we could, and accept the inevitable. We went to the hospital to deliver the news to Jessica. I can't tell you how hard it was to see the disappointment and anger in her eyes in her weakened state. I started to question myself about my resignation to events beyond my control. My resignation slowly ignited into an ember when Jessica's husband drove her from their home in Olla to the ULM campus only four days following her surgery to attend a meeting with students in the Medical Laboratory Science Program at ULM, university administrators and MLS faculty. Flames began to burst from my heart when our students expressed their concerns with eloquence and passion at the meeting. I think the reason I still enjoy teaching so much is that I need to be around young people to be inspired. They haven't been kicked down so many times as we older folks have so they are quick to act on their convictions. I asked my mom, sister and a dear friend to pray with me yesterday. I asked them to pray for me to have godly wisdom that is promised in James 1:5-6 so I would know whether to speak up or be silent about the decision at ULM. As Mama prayed that I might know whether this is "a time to keep silence or a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:7) I felt the flames slowly growing hotter. Last night I thought of the song *City On A Hill* by one of my favorite musical bands Casting Crowns

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City on a Hill by Casting Crowns

"Did you hear of the city on the hill?"

Said one old man to the other
It once shined bright and it would be shining still
But they all started turning on each other
You see, the poets thought the dancers were shallow
And the soldiers thought the poets were weak
And the elders saw the young ones as foolish
And the rich man never heard the poor man speak
And one by one, they ran away
With their made-up minds to leave it all behind
And the light began to fade in the city on the hill
The city on the hill
Each one thought that they knew better
But they were different by design
Instead of standing strong together
They let their differences divide
And the world is searching still

But it was the rhythm of the dancers
That gave the poets life
It was the spirit of the poets
That gave the soldiers strength to fight
It was the fire of the young ones
It was the wisdom of the old
It was the story of the poor man
That needed to be told
It is the rhythm of the dancers
That gives the poets life
It is the spirit of the poets
That gives the soldiers strength to fight
It is the fire of the young ones
It is the wisdom of the old
It is the story of the poor man
That's needing to be told
One by one, will we run away
With our made-up minds to leave it all behind
As the light begins to fade in the city on the hill
One by one, will we run away
With our made-up minds to leave it all behind
As the light begins to fade in the city on the hill
The city on the hill"

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I am not concerned about losing my job. I am one of those unusual people who sees change and hardship as an adventure to be enjoyed. There are lots of jobs available in my field, and I have a good reputation in the laboratory community along with recent clinical experience and skills. Most of all I believe God's Word that says, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19) However, I am gravely concerned about the impact this closure will have on healthcare delivery and economics in Northeast Louisiana. Our program does not cost the university much money. Our budget is roughly equal to the tuition and professional fees generated by our students. In addition, the sum of our three faculty's salaries is about the same as that of one administrator. Remember, only one of those administrative positions has been eliminated in this reorganizational structure.

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If you would like more information about the contributions of Medical Laboratory Scientists, please read the following Facebook post by one of our recent graduates, Katie Patrick:

"I just received word that the ULM Medical Laboratory Sciences Program is being cut. Upon first glance, most of you may not know what the program even does. It is the program I graduated from. This program has turned out amazing Med Techs over many, many years. ULM is cutting this program because they don't understand the importance of it, as is the story with most of our community, even those in the medical field.

We are, simply put, lab people. We do blood work, microbiology, histology, and cytology. We are the only reason that 99% of diseases are able to be definitively diagnosed and properly treated. We are behind the scenes. We don't get credit for most of the work we do. But have you ever known someone who needed blood work, was diagnosed with cancer, was on blood thinners, had to have a transfusion, had an infection that could only be treated by identifying the organism the person was infected with? Med Techs analyze your blood work. We grow and test your organisms to see what they are resistant or responsive to. We know your history and we make suggestions to doctors and nurses on a daily basis when we see a shift in anything that looks like its abnormal for YOUR results. We know our patients and care deeply about them, even when they don't know us.

My point in all of this is that our community needs a constant flow of fresh-minded Med Techs (or Medical Laboratory Scientists as we are now called). We don't just push buttons to get your results out. We analyze. We know what's right or wrong for our patients. YOU need us. Our community, local and medical, needs us. The medical community cannot run without a lab, and a lab cannot run without Med Techs."

If you share my concerns, please contact the individuals on the following pages.

Sincerely,
Melanie Chapman

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Unexpected Publicity

<http://www.myarklamiiss.com/story/d/story/ulm-program-spotlight-medical-laboratory-science/14340/177akKObU0515V4tEIXGwg>

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ULM Program Spotlight: Medical Laboratory Science

MELANIE CHAPMAN
ULM MEDICAL LABORATORY SCIENCE

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laboratory plan supports ULM's medical lab program

MONROE, La. (KNOX 9 News) - The Medical Laboratory Sciences program at the University of Louisiana at Monroe has begun registering students for fall 2014, after the university withdrew its program termination request from consideration by the Louisiana Board of Regents.

budget cuts forced a university proposal to eventually shutter the program in 2015, but through collaborative efforts of various healthcare professionals and the ULM HMLS faculty and administration, the program will continue as a premier platform in the region, providing hospitals with medical laboratory scientists who are integral to the detection of illness.

More than 20 providers committed to funding the program over the next two years. Efforts by the HMLS faculty and the community partners to recruit more students into the program are expected to produce self-sufficiency after that.

"I'm very happy about the new partnerships," said ULM president Dr. Nick J. Brown. "I am grateful to the medical community for assisting in, and to the faculty for getting heavily involved in the recruiting process. This is another great community and university partnership and we all look forward to growing the team together."

The university set a plan for reorganization in October 2013 which did not include termination of the HMLS program, due to the high cost of educating the small state population.

"Learning of the fate of the program, members of the area's healthcare community conveyed the need to continue the program and began an effort with the university for a solution.

"Northeast Louisiana, we are the poorest part of the state," said Debbie

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