

WITNESS ORAL STATEMENT
PRESIDENT NICK J. BRUNO
Senate Small Business Committee Field Hearing
Louisiana Delta Community College
Friday, February 20, 2015

I want to thank Senator Vitter for the opportunity to address the very important topic of higher education and the challenges and opportunities we face as we work toward facilitating and advancing innovation within our institution. Innovation and focus are critical in preparing our students for the workforce.

The current workforce needs in Louisiana are very diverse. We continue to have considerable necessity for a significant blue collar workforce, but that workforce requires different skills and technology from their predecessors.

The reliance on technology in all applications requires training at a higher level. These jobs, such as process technology, are intensive and comprehensive training programs that provide not only the skills to operate in a modern plant environment, but also facilitate these jobs with a greater understanding of the processes.

Our community and technical colleges are doing well in the preparation of this workforce and in helping to fill the demand for trained professionals. In addition, they are preparing many of those students for the opportunity to earn a four-year degree.

Louisiana's workforce is evolving and becoming more technology based. With companies such as IBM, CDC and CenturyLink operating in Louisiana, the need for more workers with training in STEM based degrees is growing faster than the universities' ability to produce these graduates, but we continue to work toward finding students who are well-suited and better prepared for entrance into these fields.

In addition, the need for health science professionals will continue to grow as a result of our aging baby boomers who are nearing retirement. This is also a very important issue related to quality of life for companies as they choose where to locate. These trends are not limited to Louisiana and are seen across the country.

Student well-being and support are important to both recruitment and retention, and as state support for higher education decreases across the country, students bear a greater proportion of the costs for their college degrees which is resulting in higher debt burden. We are confident that continued conversations about lowering interest rates for these loans will provide incentives for students to earn post-secondary credentials and reduce the economic burden they face later in life, and this burden is felt by both traditional and non-traditional students.

Non-traditional workers provide a significant source of potential students for all of higher education and to assist in building our skilled workforce. In order to tap into that pool of potential students, institutions must alter what has been a delivery model focused upon students of traditional age.

Institutions should understand that non-traditional students bring with them many life experiences, which adds value to their classroom instruction. Universities will need to look more closely and adopt effective systems of granting credit for both the life and work experiences non-traditional students have gained through their careers.

Another issue is that of convenience. Non-traditional students usually work or maintain households and families. Providing classes at times convenient to these students is critical in maximizing their attendance and success. For example, on-line instruction provides this convenience. At ULM we have redesigned our on-line offerings by creating eULM.

eULM provides 8-week modules which allow students to opt in and out as they wish. It also provides a more expedient path to completion. We offer 36 online degree programs ranging from associate to doctoral level degrees. ULM has also initiated several Post Baccalaureate Certificates, which provide individuals—generally non-traditional—the opportunity to certify in high demand fields such as accounting, computer information systems, and financial analytics.

Finally, faculty must be made aware of the sensitivities of the non-traditional student. These sensitivities include work and family demands that are not as prevalent for most traditional college students, and we try to provide services—like the child development center; a full-time student advocate and retention coordinator to help students resolve problems with university procedures and policies; and four full-time academic advisors for online students—that help our non-traditional students advance in their coursework while maintaining full time careers and families.

At ULM, our community partnerships are also important to the sustainability of our university. We have been very aggressive in developing collaborative agreements with local businesses, as well as educational partners like Louisiana Delta Community College. ULM's business partners include Chase, CenturyLink, Angus Chemical, area hospitals and clinics, and school systems to name a few.

In these partnerships we become more aware of the needs they have for the graduates we produce. To ensure our graduates are prepared, we work with our partners to adjust curricula, co-sponsor pertinent and timely symposia, and pursue research in areas which will have broad based benefit for our students, who will hopefully become their employees.

Together, with Arkansas State University, ULM has been contracted by the Delta Regional Authority to operate a leadership institute in the lower Mississippi River Delta. The program trains community leaders and develops their skills to face the global challenges of the 21st Century.

We are also currently working with JP Morgan Chase to develop a post-baccalaureate program in mortgage analytics that will help their employees use data more effectively. We have also partnered with JPMorgan Chase and United Way to develop a high school financial literacy program that has been taught to thousands of high school sophomores throughout the region.

ULM faculty have visited local high schools to deliver the training and have developed an online version of the program as well. In addition to basic financial literacy concepts, the program emphasizes the importance of education and preparation for good paying jobs. The program has exposed students to careers in business, an area that has many in-demand career opportunities in Louisiana.

ULM faculty and staff worked closely with CenturyLink to develop two innovative post baccalaureate certificate programs to help meet CenturyLink's workforce needs in accounting and computer information systems. ULM and CenturyLink collaborated to define the curriculum that would prepare existing CenturyLink employees to move into high demand positions. Classes are offered onsite at CenturyLink, and the Louisiana Workforce Commission has provided funding to support both programs.

Our Office of Continuing Education provides courses for area dentists and dental hygienists and numerous certification programs also are available in areas such as diabetic wound care, phlebotomy, and certified nurse assistance.

ULM has also developed degree programs focused on the use of unmanned aerial systems in the field of precision agriculture. A regional center of excellence was also established and has received its first external funding with a grant from the Delta Regional Authority, which will help train farmers in the use of UAS's and the data they collect.

ULM partnered with a local farmer to pilot the application of ULM's UAS (drone) in precision agriculture. The ULM drone has been flown over farmland throughout the growing season, capturing images that have led to decisions regarding application of fertilizer, chemicals, and water. Through this partnership, ULM anticipates enhancing its ability to capture data through the use of drones, but more importantly, develop expertise in data management including data representation, analysis, and interpretation.

We continue to develop courses and curricula based on the use of unmanned aircraft, and await the establishment of Federal Aviation Administration policies and procedures which will allow the developers of intellectual property to proceed within federal laws. Innovation is a byproduct of the discovery process. Most innovation materializes as a result of pursuing another discovery (e.g. Post it notes). Regulations regarding Unmanned Aircraft must be formulated and issued in order to maximize the opportunities for expansion of innovation. Delays in FAA regulations for these programs prohibit universities from maximizing the benefits and opportunities these aircraft can afford.

Similar to our UAS program, ULM's innovative outdoor Construction Practices Lab simulates a construction site and allows students to gain critical hands-on experience managing the various aspects associated with construction projects. A majority of equipment and supplies for the lab have been donated by local and regional construction companies.

ULM works toward preparing our students for the workforce by giving them the connections with community and national partners, coupled with the skills needed to be competitive in both the classroom and the ever-evolving job market. Our goal is to ensure that we provide each student an education they can be proud of and that they can use to provide intellectual capital to our region, and to our state.

As you can tell, I am very passionate about higher education, especially at ULM. Thank your for this opportunity to provide input to this committee.