Synthesis and Overview

Principal character of East Carolina University’s Master of Library Science Program

For more than 70 years, East Carolina University (ECU) has recognized the importance of library science as an essential disciplinary offering. Established in 1939, the program’s long history demonstrates a steadfast commitment to library education, the capacity to withstand and embrace change, and more recently, the capability to make sustained improvements in program quality based on evidence. Currently, the program is organized within the College of Education (COE) as the Master of Library Science (MLS) Program in the Department of Interdisciplinary Professions. This department name became official on July 1, 2014, and reflects the incorporation of two additional COE graduate programs, Adult Education and Counselor Education, into the former Department of Information and Library Science.

The MLS is an online degree program requiring 39 credit hours, consisting of 13 three semester-hour courses. Taken together, the eight full-time faculty have a significant history of professional work in the field in the three library pathways of the program: academic, public, and school libraries. ECU’s MLS program has a substantial focus on educating school library media specialists, but offers curriculum pathways in public and academic librarianship as well. The MLS program is nationally recognized by the American Association of School Librarians of the American Library Association (ALA/AASL) through the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). The program is the largest producer of school library media specialists in the state of North Carolina. ECU is a strong regional institution, and its MLS program was intended primarily to serve eastern North Carolina, but it now serves program students, public schools, and libraries in rural communities throughout the state.

The Strengths, Limitations, and Challenges of the ECU MLS Program

Program Strengths

The strengths of ECU’s MLS program include its distinctive reputation as a high quality, student-centered graduate program. Students, alumni, employers, and professional colleagues value the program’s responsiveness, and the high quality of interpersonal and organizational communication with stakeholders and members of the public. Alumni have consistently been the program’s best recruitment tool. As the largest producer of school library media specialists in North Carolina and recognized as a successful program by ALA/AASL, the program is now ready to expand this success to potential librarians who will serve public and academic library user populations.
The strengths of ECU’s MLS program include its highly productive and diverse faculty who are committed to excellent teaching, who have crafted an essential curriculum, and who enjoy strong support within the COE. Program faculty members’ teaching assignments are closely aligned to their qualifications, competencies, and research interests within the field of librarianship, and full-time faculty teach the vast majority of program courses. Each MLS program faculty member has had a successful career as a practitioner in addition to a doctoral education.

The faculty have a strong record of research and teaching. Their mean publications per year have been ranked second among COE equivalent faculties, and their mean student evaluations of teaching have been ranked first or second among COE department faculties. During 2007-2012, their mean student evaluation of teaching score was above the mean score for all ECU faculty teaching graduate-level courses. In a 2011 analysis of faculty self-assessment of instruction compared to students’ opinions of instruction, there was a strong positive correlation between student opinion of instruction and faculty self-assessment of instruction (.598), and students consistently scored faculty members higher than faculty members scored themselves.

The strengths of ECU’s MLS degree program include strong connections to community. The program has a long history of serving rural communities and a natural connection with a COE partnership of 36 eastern, mostly rural North Carolina school districts (the Latham Clinical Schools Network). The MLS degree program not only attracts students from the Latham Clinical schools who want to pursue licensure as school librarians, but students in other rural and remote areas of North Carolina. In 2006, the program was awarded a $663,000 IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant, which funded 47 scholarships and produced 44 graduates to work in the Latham Clinical Schools Network of school districts. In 2014, the MLS program was awarded a second IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant ($494,324) to fund 30 full tuition and fees scholarships. This grant is titled the North Carolina Economically Disadvantaged and Diversity Scholarships (NC-EDDS), and has recruited 15 candidates from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and 15 candidates from diverse backgrounds. This IMLS grant was one of only 23 proposals funded, out of 82 submitted. Twenty-seven of 30 IMLS Fellows began the program in Fall 2014, and the remaining three will begin the program in Spring 2015.

The program maintains both high quality and cost-effectiveness. The 2012 program report to AASL was selected by NCATE (now consolidated into CAEP) to serve as an example for other programs. An Internet report by GetEducated.com claims ECU’s MLS degree program as the most affordable online library science degree program in the United States. ECU tuition and fees per graduate credit hour for all distance education students are $222 for in-state students and $826 for out-of-state students.
Program Limitations and Challenges

The primary limitations faced by the MLS program arise from the economic environment, and are perceived as a series of challenges to be met over time rather than permanent limitations to program quality or strength. As with all constituent institutions of The University of North Carolina system, ECU’s level of state support has been reduced in response to the state’s weakened economy. ECU has weathered permanent reductions in state support of four percent in 2008-2009, nine percent in 2009-2010, 3.5% in 2010-2011, 16% in 2011-2012, and three percent in 2012-2013.

So grave were the economic challenges of the 2011-2012 budget reductions that ECU created a process for prioritizing academic programs in search of savings. As one result of this process, the University Program Prioritization Committee recommended that the Department of Library Science (DLS) and the Department of Business and Information Technologies (BITE) merge their respective departments. The merger was implemented on July 1, 2013 and the new department was named the Department of Information and Library Science (ILS). Although the merger had the positive effect of increasing faculty personnel resources and increasing the relative size of the new department within the COE, it required care to ensure that the MLS program, along with the former BITE programs, retained autonomous status in terms of curriculum and admission decisions, and full participation in making personnel recommendations.

As a further response to the Program Prioritization Committee’s suggested strategy, Department of Information and Library Science faculty began to meet with faculty in the COE Adult Education and Counselor Education programs to discuss their incorporation into the Department of Information and Library Science. Five bi-weekly meetings of all program facilities were held between March and May of 2014, and resulted in the agreement to combine and form the Department of Interdisciplinary Professions and recommend a governance structure for the Department. By the end of May 2014, required changes to the COE Unit Code of Operations had been approved by the COE faculty, the ECU Faculty Senate, and the Chancellor, and became effective on July 1, 2014. The Department of Interdisciplinary Professions is chaired by Dr. Vivian Mott, and supported by four Program Coordinators who will take responsibility for leadership at the program levels. The Program Coordinator for the MLS program is Dr. John B. Harer.

The Challenge of Declining Enrollments

In addition to ECU’s reduced funding circumstances, declining enrollments have been a challenge. From a peak enrollment in the academic year 2009-2010, program enrollment declined each year through the end of 2013. Most ECU MLS program students are working adults for whom the cost of a graduate education may be considered a luxury in today’s economy. Five University of North Carolina system schools offer an MLS or MLIS degree, and in the graph below, ASU refers to
Appalachian State University, which offers an MLS program. The other four are University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; North Carolina Central University, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; and East Carolina University. Four of the five library science programs in the UNC System have experienced declines in enrollments since the effects of the recession became evident in 2009.

Enrollment Trends—All UNC System Library Science Programs

![Enrollment Trends Graph](image)

Data set from: [http://old.northcarolina.edu/ira/ir/analytics/enrdeg.htm](http://old.northcarolina.edu/ira/ir/analytics/enrdeg.htm)

Decline in enrollments have been experienced by almost all of the graduate programs at ECU, but the largest declines have been in graduate degree programs within the COE. The Graduate School held a series of workshops for the graduate program advisors to explore the reasons for these declines and to develop strategies to improve enrollments. The high cost of a graduate education was identified as one factor. Competition from other institutions, including for-profit universities, especially those offering online degrees, was seen as another factor in declining graduate degree enrollments at ECU. Also, as the North Carolina legislature has decreased funding to public schools, and some school districts responded by cutting teaching and instructional support positions, including school library media specialists and media assistants.

In response to declining enrollment, Dr. Harer, the MLS Program Coordinator, and faculty have increased recruiting efforts, including holding a series of informational meetings in locations throughout the state, sponsoring exhibit booths at state library conferences, and publishing a new program brochure. When the program was awarded a 2014 IMLS scholarship grant for the North Carolina
Economically Disadvantaged and Diversity Scholarships project (NC-EDDS) to fund 30 scholarships, recruitment efforts increased in intensity. In Fall 2013, the program had accepted 47 new students, and 41 of these students eventually enrolled and attended classes. In Fall 2014, the program accepted 91 new students and 75 of these students enrolled and are currently attending classes. Of the nearly 150 potential students applied for the NC-EDDS scholarship, 21 who were not selected enrolled in the program despite their lack of success in competing for an IMLS award. New admissions have increased by 83% over last year, and the student headcount is now 191, up 8.5% from Fall 2013.

Other Limitations and Challenges

Although one strength of the program is recognition by ALA-AASL through CAEP, the lack of ALA accreditation makes the program understandably less attractive to students who hope to work in professional positions in public libraries, and community college, college, and university libraries. Students graduating from the MLS program in the Public Library Pathway are eligible for North Carolina Public Library Certification by the North Carolina State Library, but this does not ensure eligibility for employment in all North Carolina public libraries. Graduates of the ECU MLS program have been hired in North Carolina public and community college libraries as professional librarians, but the lack of ALA accreditation reduces ECU graduates’ chances for employment in North Carolina institutions that prefer an ALA-accredited degree, and virtually eliminates the chance for employment where an ALA-accredited degree is required.

Unique Features and Culture and Context of the Program, College and University

ECU, a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina System, is a public doctoral university committed to meeting the educational needs of North Carolina and the mid-Atlantic region. It offers baccalaureate, masters, specialist, and doctoral degrees in the liberal arts, sciences, and professional fields, including medicine and dentistry. ECU is located in the coastal region of North Carolina in Greenville, a rapidly growing city of more than 84,000 persons. It serves a large rural area. Of the 27,000-plus students, 23% are minorities. Twenty-one percent of all students are enrolled in distance education courses only.

The COE consists of six academic departments that offer seventeen undergraduate degree programs, twenty-two graduate degree programs, six programs for advanced certification, and the EdD program in educational leadership.

Beginning in 1939, the then East Carolina College’s Library Science Program was authorized to offer undergraduate courses in library science leading to state certification for school librarians. In 1947, an undergraduate minor in library science was first offered at East Carolina College by the Library Services Division. In 1950, a Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) degree for secondary education was
established, and, under this degree, it was possible for students to earn a graduate minor in library science. In 1970, the MLS degree program was approved at ECU, and the first students were admitted to the program. In 2001, the MLS degree program was approved for online delivery. This reflected the growing online education environment of ECU and the COE; ECU is now the largest producer of online courses and degree programs in the state of North Carolina.

Providing programs, opportunities, and services to rural North Carolina, especially in eastern North Carolina, is an historic aspect of the mission of ECU, the COE, and the MLS program. ECU has a number of rural programs, institutes, and services, which include the Center for Sustainable Rural Tourism, the Rural Health Scholarship Program, and the College of Dentistry whose mission is to provide dental health services to rural North Carolina communities.

Eighty-two percent of students enrolled in Fall 2013 resided one of the 63 rural counties in North Carolina with higher poverty rates than the state average of 18%. Fifty-five percent of these students resided in one of the 44 eastern North Carolina counties, 27% resided in other rural and poor counties, and 18% resided in urban/suburban North Carolina counties.

As a result, the COE has strong regional ties with 36 rural eastern North Carolina school districts (the Latham Clinical Schools Network) and manages an undergraduate education program, the State Employees Credit Union (SECU) Partnership East, which supports students pursuing an undergraduate education degree by providing instruction for the first two years of their degree program at local community colleges, and the last two years at ECU. Online education, including the MLS degree program, is seen as a significant means for supporting rural communities with educational opportunities.

The MLS program has several features of note. The MLS program took on the challenge not only of going fully online in 2001, but of developing and delivering a high-quality online program. By combining the positive, student-centered aspects of face-to-face instruction with highly-interactive technologies and student collaborative work and required field experiences, the program has achieved success. The program’s ALA Student Chapter was the first in the nation to be recognized at a program without ALA-accreditation. The Student Chapter conducts a number of social activities to enrich the degree experience, student dinners and other social events at state wide conferences, and conducts an annual book drive for local charities. State and nationally known speakers attend the Student Chapter’s virtual meetings, and in 2013-2014, presenters included ALA President Barbara Stripling and ALA Office for Accreditation Director, Karen O’Brien.

**Conformance to the ALA-COA Standards for Accreditation**
The ECU MLS program has created its mission, goals, and objectives to nest closely within those of ECU and the COE, and has designed and followed a systematic and collaborative planning process to

- ensure the review and revision of program mission, goals and objectives (five-year data collection plan, five-year planning cycle)
- ensure program students’ achievement of program objectives through multiple assessments (instructor evaluation, student-to-student evaluation, internship supervisor evaluation, and alumni and employer evaluations)
- ensure the involvement of program stakeholder groups, including students, alumni, and employers, the MLS Program Advisory Board, alumni/student forums
- actively plan and implement program improvements based in part on stakeholder input (faculty planning meetings, bi-annual faculty curriculum workshops, Advisory Board meetings, and alumni/student forums)

The ECU MLS program has constructed a curriculum closely aligned to its mission, goals, and objectives, and which

- offers a coherent, yet flexible course of study to provide students with the basic knowledge, competences, and experiences required for entry to the profession
- employs a continuous review and revision process that is responsive to the professional environment and to stakeholder input, but remains the ultimate responsibility of program faculty
- has been responsive to change at the program and course levels
- has demonstrated program effectiveness in accomplishing the mission, goals, and objectives through multiple student assessments, including evidence documented in student portfolios

The ECU MLS program faculty is characterized by

- an earned doctorate in library and/or information science or in a closely related discipline, a master’s degree in information and/or library science, and has met the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools’ (SACS) faculty credentialing requirements
- admission to the ECU Graduate Faculty at the highest level of eligibility
- a record of excellence in teaching, which has been manifested on Student Opinion of Instruction Surveys and Graduate Exit Surveys that consistently outrank the scores of other ECU graduate faculties, and Student Perception of Teaching Survey scores that continue to indicate a high quality of instruction.
- a sustained record of scholarship appropriate to faculty teaching assignments, of sufficient quantity and quality, and balanced among each member’s respective administrative and service responsibilities
• a record of service to the program, the Department, the College of Education, the institution, and the profession
• a student to full-time faculty ratio of 24:1

The ECU MLS program provides students with

• well-articulated and publicly available policy statements and related information on matters that affect program students (admissions, registration, advising, course syllabi, assignment of course grades, portfolio requirements, tuition and financial aid, and requirements for good academic standing)
• opportunities and encouragement for online students to engage with their instructors and their classmates, using both synchronous and asynchronous methods (online chat, web-conferencing, reflective writing blogs, assignments requiring collaborative student work, critique of classmates’ work) and outside the confines of coursework (ALA Student Chapter, program Facebook, social events at professional conferences and meetings)
• opportunities for field experiences and to engage with working professionals (visits to libraries, interviewing working librarians, in-class guest speakers, required library internship)
• an increasingly diverse group of classmates and faculty (student racial and ethnic diversity has increased over time), and the last faculty search resulted in the hire of an African American faculty member), and instruction and experience with diverse library service populations (internship placements are in libraries serving diverse populations)

The ECU MLS program has a 75-year record of support and encouragement, and access to financial, administrative, and other resources sufficient to maintain the program, as evidenced by

• continued support during the recent recession, and despite reductions in state support to the institution of approximately 35% during the past five years, ECU and the COE have shown unwavering confidence in the program’s ability to recover and excel, particularly with regard to the ALA accreditation process
• commitment to program autonomy within a merged department structure, and appointment of a permanent program leader who serves as MLS Program Coordinator
• an institutional governance infrastructure that recognizes the primacy of faculty in establishing and maintaining academic quality

The ECU MLS program enjoys

• attractive and comfortable physical facilities with adequate office, meeting, and conference spaces
• a high level of computing resources and user support for students and faculty to meet the needs of online programs for research, teaching and learning,
business and general technology applications, and continuing services to student associations and alumni

- admirable library resources and electronic collections that are remotely accessible, and services that are custom designed for online program students

Accreditation by the American Library Association is a mark of quality that ECU, the COE, and the MLS program have hoped to achieve throughout the program’s recent history. We are grateful for this opportunity to submit a Program Presentation for consideration by the Committee on Accreditation, and to the Chair and members of the External Review Panel for their service.