

# MT/MLT Distance Learning Goal of Collaboration

► **ARUP and Weber State team up to make it easier for interested lab staff to advance skills**

►► **CEO SUMMARY:** *To encourage more students to pursue medical technology (MT) and medical laboratory technician (MLT) degrees, ARUP Laboratories and Weber State University (WSU) are collaborating to promote the distance learning programs offered at WSU. Online students can work any shift and take courses anytime (day, night, or on weekends), thereby making education more accessible to prospective students. Distance learning is likely to be an important source of education for new technical staff for labs.*

**T**HERE IS AN ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM at every lab industry gathering: the existing—and growing—shortage of trained technical staff. Looming over this existing labor gap is the impending retirement of the baby boomer generation from the nation's laboratories.

Many labs report an absolute inability to recruit, hire, and retain adequate numbers of medical technologists (MTs) and medical laboratory technicians (MLTs) to meet existing needs. Over the past five years, THE DARK REPORT has identified and told the stories of how innovative laboratories and hospitals are increasing funding for MT and MLT training, along with the growing use of long distance education where local programs do not exist.

Now comes news of another credible, ground-breaking effort to increase the supply of MTs (also known as clinical laboratory scientists or CLSs), MLTs (also known as clinical laboratory technicians or CLTs), and other technical positions. On July 30, 2008, **ARUP Laboratories and Weber State University (WSU)**, announced a “personnel education collaboration” that will combine Weber State’s

distance learning education programs with ARUP’s efforts to promote distance learning among its own laboratory staff and that of its client laboratories.

Both organizations are located in Utah. ARUP is based in Salt Lake City at the **University of Utah**, and Weber State is located in Ogden. WSU was the first university to offer a complete CLS bachelor’s degree and CLT associate’s degree online. As part of the agreement, the \$95 distance-learning program application fee will be waived for any applicant referred through ARUP and its Web site.

## ► **Distance Learning Goals**

This collaboration is significant because it is marketplace recognition that the best short-term solution to training more technical staff will be long distance learning programs. “We estimate that currently, educational programs in the United States produce fewer than half of the necessary laboratory personnel needed by our nation’s clinical laboratories,” explained ARUP President and COO Ronald L. Weiss, M.D., MBA. “These shortages are becoming more critical within commu-

nity health systems that operate growing laboratory outreach programs. We hope that our collaboration with Weber State provides client laboratories with an opportunity to educate laboratory personnel, without taking them away from their work sites.”

### ➤ **How Distance Learning Works**

To make distance learning succeed, students need to perform clinical work in their own laboratories. “Students access the courses online anytime,” said Yasmen Simonian, Ph.D., MT(ASCP), CLS(NCA), WSU’s Dean of the Dr. Ezekiel R. Dumke College of Health Professions. “Completion of laboratory competencies for each course occurs after work in their own facilities with approval and support of their employers.

“Rather than traveling to off-site classes, students who participate in this online program will use the resources of their respective work facilities to successfully complete required laboratory competencies,” she added. Simonian is a former Professor and Chair of the Department of Clinical Laboratory Sciences.

Weber State has offered its on-campus program in clinical laboratory sciences for 32 years. The online degree program was launched in 2001. Each year, about 75 students graduate from the department’s online and on-campus programs. Since 2001, the department has graduated about 157 students from its online program. Some 550 students are currently taking online courses at WSU in either the department’s two- or four-year programs.

### ➤ **Started Seven Years Ago**

“Seven years ago we started the online program for four-year students with the help of ARUP and **Intermountain Health Care** (IHC) in Salt Lake City,” Simonian explained. “Both IHC and ARUP had problems attracting people to work in rural Utah. So, we thought, if students can’t come to us, we’ll go to the students. What we offer online is accredited by the

**National Accrediting Agency for Clinical Laboratory Sciences** (NAACLS) of Chicago, Illinois, and parallels our on-campus offerings.”

“Like other laboratories, ARUP feels the impact of the staffing shortage,” commented Weiss. “It’s a difficult time for laboratories attempting to fill medical technologist positions. It’s a problem here and we know it’s a problem on the national level. Distance learning has helped us. Last year, we hired 116 medical technologists or med tech equivalents, and we hired 103 technologist trainees. We see how the opportunity for distance learning gives more students the ability to advance their laboratory skills and career.

“By working with client labs to offer this program to their employees and to waive the processing fee, we hope that these efforts will serve as a tipping point for some people to make that decision and enroll in these programs,” Weiss said. “Labs have to face the staff-shortage problem in creative ways if laboratory medicine is to accommodate the growth in test volumes and the new diagnostic technologies that are in our future.”

### ➤ **Education Opportunities**

At the start of the 1990s, there were about 500 accredited laboratory science programs nationally. During the balance of that decade, there was a steady decline in the number of such training programs. That left many cities without any MT/MLT training programs locally. Currently, NAACLS lists 222 educational programs nationwide for CLS/MTs, and 205 education programs for CLTs/MLTs.

Distance learning is likely to play a major role in meeting the labor supply gap, as the number of local MT/MLT training programs in this country is not likely to increase significantly in the next few years. **TDR**

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