

The Fall of an Icon

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"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times...."

On August 31, 2023, Alderson-Broaddus University (AB College) closed its doors on an institution founded in 1871. That closure included the end to one of the most storied physician assistant programs in the country. Dr. [Hu Crim Myers](#), a surgeon, with the support of Dr. Richard Shearer, President of Alderson-Broaddus College, embarked upon the initiation of the first 4-year baccalaureate degree program for physician assistants (PAs) in the fall of 1968.¹ This was just one year following the first two-year certificate graduate class from Duke University. The program complimented the 4-year degree programs of nursing, radiologic technology, and medical technology already offered at this rural West Virginia college. The clinical capabilities of its graduates were well recognized. The professional leadership it spawned has been recognized on all levels and included five presidents of AAPA – three of them for multiple terms. Unfortunately, this "Light on the Hill"² is now extinguished. The cause of its demise will be debated and studied by academics and administrators eager to avoid a similar fate.



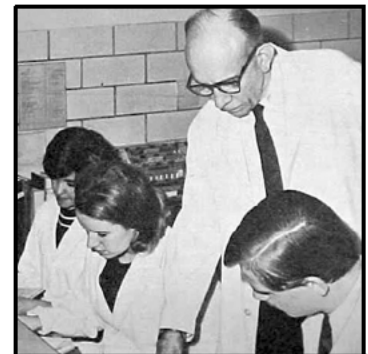
Dr Shearer and Dr Myers, 1968

There is irony to be found in the college's/university's beginning and its end. In the 1920s Alderson Academy in West Virginia and Broaddus Institute, which originated in Virginia, faced financial difficulties. Their merger was intended to abate their economic concerns and Alderson-Broaddus



Alderson-Broaddus First PA Class, 1968

College opened its doors in 1932.³ While finances are always a particular concern for small private liberal arts colleges, the school did continue to grow and thrive though enrollment stayed below 1,000 students per year for decades. It was its longest serving president, Dr. Richard Shearer, who from 1951 to 1983 helped



Dr. Myers w/students, c.1970s

ensure its financial security while embracing development of healthcare professional career options within the college, such as it did with Dr. Hu Myers.

Following Dr. Shearer, AB had four presidents until its closure. Dr. Christian Sizemore (1983-1995), Dr. Stephen Markwood (1995-2008), Mr. Richard Creehan (2011-2015) and Dr. Tim Barry (2018-2023) who also served as interim president (2015-2018). It is beyond the scope of this paper to identify each of their accomplishments or the problems they faced. Unfortunately, in the years to come, AB, like many small liberal arts colleges, would face insurmountable financial pressures. Indeed, the challenges faced by small colleges in general have been documented in recent years. In 2018, Moody's Investor Services reported that 11 colleges per year closed between 2015 and 2017. That was more than double the average⁴. In 2018, Moody's also reported that at least 25% of private colleges were running deficits⁵.



Students Glen Combs (seated), Shelly Combs standing to left, and others waiting to be filmed by NBC for a story on AB, 1971.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact. According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse, college enrollment dropped 8% from 2019 to 2022.⁶ In March of 2024, Bloomberg identified high acceptance rates, falling enrollment, and repeated years of operating losses as signs that would endanger over 200 schools of less than 5,000 students.⁷ As with AB, these statistics reflect an issue that has taken years to develop.

In the 1990s the school continued to show strong support. It realized the successful completion of a 12-million-dollar capital campaign.⁸ But there were hints that all may not be well within the school. In 1995, the historic PA program lost its accreditation by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA). Restructuring and downsizing of the program followed. Accreditation was regained the following year. Alarmed alumni of the program were astonished by this lapse of institutional oversight and commitment. Whether or not this situation was a result of some financial issue is unknown. But there were issues soon enough.

Between 2011 and 2015 AB saw enrollment grow from 500 to 1,201. The school also advanced from college to university status. There were expansive changes to the campus, particularly in its athletic programs. Multiple new sports were introduced and scholarship athletes enrolled. The student housing was renovated to accommodate the growth, and a football stadium was constructed. It was later learned that in 2012 the Board had agreed to borrow \$14 million from the endowment to keep the school open. Then, to finance the new capital projects and other programs, the AB Board had approved a municipal bond of \$37 million in 2013 at a 7% interest rate. The school eventually defaulted on the loan in 2015.^{9,10}

In July of 2017, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) first placed the school on probation. It was disclosed in a letter to the school's president that the university had a history of being unable to get enough revenue to meet its enrollment and retention goals. It was also disclosed that the school had a growing list of deferred-maintenance costs that needed attention. According to the letter, the school's governing board provided personal loans to the university to assist with the financial need. The school's associate provost at the time admitted that they had recognized financial issues since the fall of 2015. In November of 2015, the school had defaulted on bonds totaling more than \$36 million dollars. The plan then was to secure a \$53 million loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This money was to pay down the debt and help start a College of Optometry (The optometry program never materialized). The HLC was not optimistic. The letter also indicated the school had a long history of borrowing against its endowment to fund deficits without having a repayment plan.¹¹ The school continued to forge ahead and in June of 2021, HLC removed the probation status for the University but required continued monitoring.¹²

By this time, there was a heightened sense of alarm among alumni, faculty, staff, and state educational officials. In the spring of 2022, the Board voted to make an additional borrow from the Endowment. It was then identified that in 2012, notably before the aggressive expansion of athletic programs and facilities, the University had faced a financial crisis and had borrowed the bulk of the

endowment of \$14 million. In 2022, enrollment was down to 400 or 500 students despite adding educational programs. It was acknowledged that the school had operated at a deficit for nine of the last 10 years.^{10,13} Higher education officials continued to ask questions about the financial condition of AB. In 2023, the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (HEPC) was involved and considered provisional reauthorization in June of that year but had continued solvency concerns. They requested additional information and delayed plans for any action until July 2023.¹⁴

West Virginia Governor Jim Justice stepped in and requested that HEPC cancel its July meeting in order for him to be assured that all avenues have been explored in an effort to save the University. What could be done by the state was not clear as the state's flagship educational institution, West Virginia University, was facing a budget cut of \$75 million.¹⁵ In mid-July of 2023, the HLC voted to provide provisional authorization on the condition that AB demonstrated sound financial footing in the coming year.¹⁶ It seemed that the exchange of information and plans to save the University were not enough. At an emergency meeting held later in July, the HEPC voted unanimously to revoke AB's authorization to confer degrees in the state effective December 31, 2023.¹⁷ The school filed for bankruptcy in August that year. It was estimated that the school had between 100 and 200 creditors, somewhere between \$1 million and \$10 million in assets and between \$10 million and \$50 million in liabilities.^{18,19} AB closed just weeks before students were to return to campus. Only seniors expected to graduate in December could return to campus.

Students, faculty, and staff alike were thrown into disarray. At one point the school had 44 degree programs, 18 team athletic programs, and 228 employees – a significant employer in this rural county.²⁰ The economic impact in a county with a population of roughly 16,000 was estimated to be more than \$50 million based upon a 2020 presentation from the University.²¹

Colleges and universities throughout West Virginia developed special admission programs, scholarships, and financial aid programs to give AB students a place to attend for the fall. Student athletes scrambled to make known their capabilities to other schools. Faculty dusted off their resumes. Local staff prepared to be unemployed. The ARC-PA approved a temporary increase in class size for PA programs to accommodate the transfer of AB PA students.^{22,23} Student academic and financial records were transferred from AB to West Virginia Wesleyan, located in Buchannon, WV, which agreed to make transcripts and other information available to former A-B students.²⁴

In October 2023, on what would have been homecoming weekend, a group of alumni organized through Facebook groups and word of mouth a gathering they called "One More Mountaintop Memory". Alumni, professors, and staff greeted each other on the hill overlooking the Tygart Valley River to pay tribute to the school and reminisce about time spent at AB.²⁵ By the end of December, the sale of the property began.

A court-appointed trustee filed a motion to sell the former 170-acre campus and its buildings, furnishings, equipment, and supplies to DACK Investments LLC for \$4.9 million. The USDA held the first lien on the property in the amount of over \$30 million with a long list of other creditors.²⁶ The sale was to conclude on January 31, 2024. However, in January, an upset bid of \$5 million was offered by Elkins businessman Craig Phillips. Though this was an auction bid, DACK Investments opted not to counter.²⁷ In February, the campus was reopened as "Battler Knob LLC". The initial plan is to provide and rent out

office space, large and small meeting rooms, shower and event rooms, and space for weddings and/or receptions.²⁸ The company had already secured a residency from a semi-professional football team that will play at the multi-sport performance stadium originally built for the AB Battlers. The Appalachian Thunder of the Tri-Point Football League is a 16-team league that spans West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The Thunder are one of three teams in West Virginia with the Longhorns in Ripley, and the Leviathan in Buckhannon.²⁹ While an AB Battler never set foot on the newly installed synthetic turf, certainly thousands of steps have been taken by those that leapt into their adult life and careers from the hallowed grounds of the surrounding campus.

Maybe the 1995 loss of accreditation by the PA program was a bellwether for the future demise of the University. The ARC-PA Alderson Broaddus University Accreditation History gives some evidence of a storied program having difficulty in meeting certain standards. Of particular note is that the class size in 2001 was 135. By 2013, it had been reduced to 36.³⁰ Despite what must have been some significant issues to overcome, the program remained a success to the end. Over 2,600 PAs have graduated from the AB PA Program. According to information previously provided publicly by the school, over the years of the program's existence its students had a 96% pass rate for PANCE, which exceeded the national pass rate of 93%.³¹ In recent years they celebrated a 100% pass rate for the classes.^{31,32,33} This was undoubtedly due to the support and dedication of professors, clinical instructors, and staff as well as the unwavering focus of the students.

The program produced countless national and state organizational leaders. Past AAPA Presidents included [Bill Stanhope](#), [Roger Whittaker](#), [Glen Combs](#), [Sherrie \(Borden\) McNeeley](#), and [Pam Moyers Scott](#). PAEA Presidents included [Albert Simon](#) and [Gloria Stewart](#). Ms. Stewart also served as Chair of ARC-PA. The prestigious "Hu C & Avenelle Myers Award" given to AB alumni in recognition of achievement and leadership in the PA profession honored [Glen Combs](#), Rodney Moser, Sandra (Nettrour) Rothwell, [Pam Moyers Scott](#), [Albert Simon](#), Alice Stanley, [Gloria Stewart](#), Mary Vakala, Cynthia (Talbot) Vincent and myself ([Stephen Wilson](#)). Other AB graduates featured in the PA History Society biographies include [Joseph Varano](#), [Edward "Chip" Hedrick](#), and [Brad Schwarz](#). Listing those who have contributed to advance local, regional, and national PA endeavors are too numerous for this article. Those AB graduates that provided much needed care will always be remembered by their patients.

The "Light on the Hill" has dimmed but like a lighthouse on the shore that no longer guides and warns ships at sea, AB's PA program and the college/university have well served humanity. AB forever changed the journey of the PA profession. The vision of Dr. Hu Myers and his wife Avenelle was ahead of its time. In his book *"The Physician's Assistant: A Baccalaureate Curriculum"* Dr. Myers summarizes the background, philosophy, curriculum, and results of the pioneer baccalaureate degree program. Dr. Myers embraced the value of a liberal arts education with the professional endeavor. Those enrolled in the program began going to Saturday morning "Grand Rounds" and took classes like "History, Philosophy, and Ethics of Medicine" as well as the sciences in their first year. While primary care was the emphasis for all programs of that era, the value of a PA in surgery could not have been lost on this talented surgeon. Dr. Myers advancement of the profession was continuously embraced by the program faculty and staff. The PA program bestowed the college's first graduate degree when it became a master's program in 1991. They later initiated fellowships in rural health and emergency medicine. The academic accomplishments of the program have seen several generations of providers enter

successfully into the ever-changing world of healthcare. Like the knowledge they have stored away, so too will be the memories of their time on the Hill.

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This article was researched and written by Steve Wilson class of 1974 and reviewed by Glen Combs class of 1973.

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