



**Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium
Executive Committee Annual Meeting
Minutes**

Friday, August 22, 2025, at 10:00 a.m.

Attendees:

Mr. Jo Bonner, University of South Alabama
Dr. Chris Roberts, Auburn University
Dr. Chuck Karr, University of Alabama at Huntsville
Dr. John Valentine, Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium
David England, Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium
Shelley Stephens, Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium
Dr. Andi Kent, University of South Alabama

Absent:

Dr. Peter Mohler, University of Alabama
Dr. Todd Fritch, University of West Alabama

- Meeting called to order by Dr. Valentine, Executive Director of the Marine Environmental Sciences Consortium (MESC) Executive Committee at 10:00 a.m.
- Roll call of conference call attendees was forgone by Dr. Valentine, noting that Presidents Mohler and Fritch were absent from the call due to scheduling conflicts.
- Dr. Valentine took a moment to request attendees review the agenda and suggest any additional topics the Executive Committee members present would like to add. Dr. Kent, on behalf of President Bonner, requested the Executive Director review process be added to the agenda for discussion.
- Dr. Valentine requested a motion to approve minutes from the 2024 MESC Executive Committee conference call. Motion made by President Roberts to approve the minutes; motion seconded by President Karr. Motion to approve minutes carried.
- Dr. Valentine took a moment to review the importance of remote marine laboratories, such as the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, and some of the challenges that face them.

NEW BUSINESS

Fiscal Year 2026 Budget (Attached Document A) –

- Dr. Valentine reviewed the summary format of the FY26 budget, with the top two categories addressing expenses which are unrestricted and categorized by function and object. The bottom three categories address revenues and they, too, are categorized by function.
- Dr. Valentine presented the annual budget of \$22,367,460 for approval and highlighted the state appropriation increase to \$1,006,490,000, representing a million dollar increase over the last 5 years.
 - President Roberts asked about prospects of revenue going forward given recent changes.
 - Dr. Valentine explained DISL has not experienced budget cuts that other institutions are facing and will address revenue prospects later in the presentation. He did point out that

DISL had long-term grants in hand currently, and none were from HHS, NIH, of CDC which seemed to be targeted.

- Dr. Valentine called for a vote to accept the FY26 MESC Budget. President Bonner made the motion, and President Karr seconded. The budget was approved by a vote of the Executive Committee.

University Programs Performance Metrics

- Dr. Valentine reviewed the enrollment in the “Semester by the Sea” spring term. USA had the most students, but word has spread to other smaller MESC member schools. The spring term delivered 420 credit hours amongst five MESC schools. Dr. Valentine also referred to President Roberts’ question on revenues by explaining that new forms of tuition revenues is one way to address revenue challenges.
- On the next slide, Dr. Valentine reviewed the results of summer 2025 session enrollment that continues to prove that DISL is meeting the mandate in the MESC Articles of Incorporation. We had 14 of our 21 universities represented, while some of our smaller schools saw decreases in their numbers. Dr. Valentine mentioned the outcome of his recent visit to Stillman College, that HBCU students have the disadvantage of having to work during the summer and that typically presents a challenge to these students attending in the summer term, so the spring term has presented an option for their students. This summer USA had the largest percentage of students enrolled, followed by UA and Auburn.
- Dr. Valentine mentioned he recently spent time on Auburn’s campus meeting with Deans and Department Chairs to discuss courses and student enrollment. He was reporting that DISL was here to help students with marine biology interests.
- One the next slide Dr. Valentine highlighted the historical growth in the demand for courses that are tracked from year to year. He pointed out that beginning around 2008 the trend in demand from undergraduate and graduate courses really began growing year over year. We appear to be reaching an asymptote in enrollment, but this could be attributed to the limited housing, and this could change when the new dormitory comes online.
- Dr. Valentine also mentioned that some 500 students visited our campus in the academic year from 12 MESC schools.

Discovery Hall Programs Summer School Performance Metrics

- Next Dr. Valentine discussed the Discovery Hall Programs for K-12 education and emphasized the importance of reaching students before high school to develop budding scientists. DHP faculty visit schools throughout all Alabama counties.
- During the academic year 7,620 K-12 students, teachers, and chaperones participated in programs on campus, including 4,148 in overnight programs. He described the BayMobile mobile classroom initiative that reached 12,622 students across 36 schools, 34 of which were Title I schools.

- The K-12 program has reservations set up two years in advance, indicating strong interest and while this year's numbers were down slightly this was due to limited housing during the renovations of the existing dorms.

Alabama Center of Excellence -

- Dr. Valentine presented information about research funding distributed through the Alabama Center of Excellence. He explained how funds from the Restore Act were distributed through competitive extramural grants. The slide showed that Auburn University, University of Alabama, and University of South Alabama dominated the landscape in terms of funding received. Dr. Valentine noted that investigators at one institution were mandated to partner with an investigator at a second institution to encourage cross-fertilization

Alabama's Real-Time Coastal Observing System

- Dr. Valentine explained the Alabama Real-Time Coastal Observing System, more commonly known as ARCOS, started as a collaborative effort with USA and Mobile Bay NEP to monitor near real-time coastal conditions for research purposes. DISL recently took this data and repackaged it in a way to benefit the public in making safe boating decisions around Mobile Bay and coastal areas. A new app was launched just ahead of the Mobile Jaycee's Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo in July. It is a free app and can be downloaded through Apple and Google app stores.
- Since its release, it has been downloaded by over 2,000 users.

Campus Infrastructure Improvements

- Dr. Valentine acknowledged financial assistance by the Alabama Legislature to make DISL infrastructure improvements possible.
- First, Dr. Valentine told the committee that improvements to the two existing dormitories were completed in time for summer sessions. The improvements included new windows, HVAC, upgraded fire safety equipment, and removal of the storm shutters. Two fire drills were successfully conducted over the summer terms.
- Next, Dr. Valentine updated the Committee on the status of the new research vessel which was first made possible by President Bonner when he was Governor Ivey's Chief of Staff with funds through GOMESA. The vessel, with an aluminum hull, is being built in Louisiana because all coastal Alabama builders were unavailable. The vessel will be ready in December 2026.
- The New Campus Aquatic Center has been made possible by the DISL Foundation which helped build the 75'x24' swimming pool which makes our scientific diving program possible. Currently under construction is the adjacent outdoor classroom which will be completed by October of this year.
- The new dormitory is underway. The bid opening was held July 31 was awarded to Rogers and Willard with a bid amount of \$10,985,023. It will be two stories, but only the first floor

will be finished out and furnished. It would require \$4-\$5 million to finish the second floor. Because of the dorm requirements a new 10" water line will have to be constructed to provide the necessary water pressure for fire systems. This new dormitory will provide additional housing that will facilitate the growth of existing and new programs.

- President Karr asked if the second floor would also contain 61 beds. Dr. Valentine and Ms. Stephens explained the floor plan of the second floor would be geared more towards graduate student and long-term residence needs.

Research-Intellectual Infrastructure

- Dr. Valentine introduced the Committee to the new DISL faculty hired.
 - These included Dr. Katrina Phillips who focuses on movement using genomics in sea turtles. She started at DISL on August 18.
 - The second faculty member is Dr. Marshall Bowles who was hired away from LUMCON. He is a biogeochemist and will help USA's chemical ecology class.
 - The third faculty member is Nicole Phillips who comes from University of Southern Mississippi. She works with conservation genetics and brings environmental DNA to the table.
 - These three hires nearly get us back to full faculty capacity.

Community Informal Education

- Dr. Valentine mentioned that our community has a great deal of interest in the work of DISL and there are several ways DISL engages with them.
- DISL annual open house known as "Discovery Day" which saw approximately 1,800 attendees visit research labs where graduate students explained their research through graphics and hands-on activities.
- The Alabama Aquarium continues to see strong attendance levels. The Aquarium has seen attendance of 100,000-plus visitors annually since the name change from Estuarium to the Alabama Aquarium. With the assistance of Representative Chip Brown and Senator David Sessions, the DISL Aquarium is now the Official Aquarium for the State of Alabama.
- Revenues from the Aquarium make up much of a portion of the Auxiliary Revenues included in the budget previously presented.
- In April of this year the second renovation was completed in the space previously known as Little Billy Goat Hole and now called Discovery Lab. This space is an immersive and creative exhibit designed for visitors aged 5-11. This exhibit was funded by GOMESA and the DISL Foundation.
- The last renovation to the Aquarium will focus on the deep sea in the Gulf of Mexico. The same design firm will also design this exhibit with the design process beginning September of this year with a target completion of fall 2026.
- Next Dr. Valentine highlighted the efforts of the DISL Foundation to promote the DISL mission

in the community. These efforts include their annual fundraiser “Cocktail with the Critters.” The annual attendance averages 400 attendees. Because DISL does not issue degrees and therefore does not have a dedicated alumni base, DISL fundraising efforts must have a different approach.

- The Foundation has a secondary event, Marine Environmental Awards Luncheon, where they recognize an individual and organization who contribute to conservation on the Gulf Coast. It features a well-known keynote speaker, and this year the speaker is Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources’ Commissioner Chris Blankenship. This year’s award recipients are Mrs. Roberta Swann, Executive Director of the Mobile Bay National Estuaries Program (Individual) and the Alabama Water Watch (Volunteer Organization). The Nature Conservancy of Alabama will be the second recipient of the Sessions-Brown Award. Attendance at this event has gone from 100 to over 300.

SWOT and Next Strategic Plan

- Dr. Valentine closed his report to the Committee by introducing an upcoming effort to perform a SWOT assessment that will include representatives from Auburn University, University of Alabama, University of South Alabama, DISL, and the DISL Foundation. The outcome of this assessment will be used to update the DISL strategic plan since the current plan is nearing its end.

Questions and Old Business

- President Bonner acknowledged that Dr. Valentine’s report highlighted a very busy year of activity on the DISL campus. And speaking on behalf himself, along with President Roberts and President Karr, appreciate his efforts to work them to update the annual evaluation process for the Executive Director position.
 - Dr. Kent appreciated the support of the committee members to help activate the evaluation process in a formal manner. This year Dr. Valentine will submit a comprehensive report as a baseline then going forward will be on an annual basis.
 - Dr. Valentine is compiling supplementary materials to submit in addition to the report already submitted.
- Dr. Kent asked, after including the newly hired faculty previously mentioned, how many faculty is DISL still down? Dr. Valentine stated in a perfect world he would add two additional faculty, one in landscape ecology and one in possibly geoscience or regulatory policy. Dr. Valentine expects the upcoming SWOT analysis to reveal a gap in the areas we serve.
- President Bonner explained to Presidents Karr and Roberts about the timeliness of Dr. Valentine’s comments in relation to the ship channel underway. He also mentioned the future 20th anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon tragedy in 2030, and that DISL, with assistance of the MESC schools, should be the lead and location for the commemoration.
 - President Roberts agreed with President Bonner on the importance of illustrating how the universities stepped up to serve the communities impacted by this event.
- With no other business, Dr. Valentine adjourned the meeting at 10:58 a.m.