

Office of the President

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March 10, 2025

Dear Members of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission:

Thank you for your interest in MTSU's proposed Master of Science in Legal Studies (MS LS) and feedback shared during our presentations to THEC's Access, Academics, and Success Committee on February 6, 2025, and the full Commission meeting on February 7, 2025. As suggested, in the past month, members of MTSU's administration, including myself and Vice Provost Amy Aldridge, have reached out specifically to Commissioner G. Will Perry, Treasurer David Lillard, Secretary Tre Hargett, and Comptroller Jason Mumpower to confirm and discuss their concerns regarding the proposed degree. Additionally, Bill Koch, president and dean at the Nashville School of Law, met with Treasurer Lillard.

The attached Q&A document is inspired by the conversations on February 6-7 and follow-up communication. It includes a history of Legal Studies degrees in the United States – dating back to Loyola University Chicago in the mid-1980s; the intended audience for said degrees; delineation of jobs in the legal field; MTSU's marketing plans; and enrollment history for the first five years of the Master Legal Studies (MLS) at the University of Tennessee Knoxville – which has experienced continual growth from 3 students in Spring 2021 to 74 students in Spring 2025.

Our hope is that the provided information clears up any concerns of Commission members, demonstrates MTSU's commitment to the success of the MS LS, and leads to a vote of support from the Commission. I am more certain than ever that this degree will fill a need in Middle Tennessee's workforce. In fact, we believe that the entertainment concentration has potential as a national draw, as it will be a unique offering in the Legal Studies landscape.

As you well know, the crafting and delivery of any degree proposal is a long, intentional journey with many hours of investment of everyone involved. In total, about 200 pages of materials related to this proposal were submitted to and reviewed by THEC staff, including a Letter of Notification (LON) in December 2023, a New Academic Program Proposal (NAPP) in August 2024, and a favorable external review conducted by Cynthia Alkon, JD, professor at Texas A&M University School of Law in November 2024. THEC staff offered approval of the proposal in a memo dated January 16, 2025, and initial review from the Commissioners occurred in early February 2025. We look forward to continued discussion later this month and appreciate the opportunity to come back before the Commission.

Thank you, again, for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Sidney A. McPhee".

Sidney A. McPhee
President

Attachment: Q&A regarding the proposed MS in Legal Studies

Middle Tennessee State University Q&A regarding the proposed MS in Legal Studies

Q: What is the history of MS Legal Studies degrees within the United States?

A: The initial equivalent degree (AKA Master of Jurisprudence) to MS Legal Studies was awarded nearly 40 years ago, in 1986, at Loyola University Chicago. The original focus was on health care; current Master of Jurisprudence offerings at Loyola are Health Law, Compliance & Enterprise Risk Management; Child and Family Law; and Rule of Law for Development.

Today, common degree designations across the United States include Master of Science (MS); Master of Science in Law (MSL); Juris Masters (JM); and Master of Jurisprudence (MJ). General studies degrees are the most common. Specialized topics include, but are not limited to, taxation, financial technology and regulation, healthcare, business law, compliance, cybersecurity/data privacy, risk/contractual management, intellectual property, homeland security and crisis management, education, environmental, and employment law.

The first MLS approved by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission occurred in May 2020 for the University of Tennessee Knoxville.¹ UTK has no concentrations within their MLS, but they do have a partnership for a dual degree with UTK Master of Social Work students and career pathways in (a) Contract Management & Business Law; (b) Human Resources; (c) Law & Social Welfare; and (d) State & Local Government.²

Q: How many Legal Studies degrees currently exist and where are they?

A: Today, there are at least 100 universities granting at least 150 degree types similar to the MS in Legal Studies. According to the American Bar Association website,³ the following universities are a sampling of institutions that currently award MS, MSL, JM, and MJ degrees in Legal Studies: University of Arkansas-Little Rock, University of Alabama, Cleveland State University, Emory University, University of Georgia, Georgetown University, University of Florida, Florida International University, University of Illinois, University of Kansas, Northern Kentucky University, University of Missouri-Kansas City, Samford University, University of Tennessee, Texas A&M University, Washburn University, Vanderbilt University, and Yale University.

Q: Who is the intended student for Legal Studies programs in general?

A: Masters-level degrees in legal studies are intended for people who already hold undergraduate degrees and whose careers intersect with the law. These students are not interested in pursuing a Juris Doctorate. In many cases, these folks work within highly regulated industries (i.e., finance,

¹ To view UTK's 2020 THEC agenda materials, visit https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/cm/2020/spring/II.E.%20UTK%20MLS_FINAL.pdf

² For more information, visit UTK's website at <https://volsonline.utk.edu/program/masters/master-of-legal-studies-mls/>

³ For a complete list of degrees and institutions, visit the American Bar Association website: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/llm-degrees_post_j_d_non_j_d/programs_by_school/

health care, intellectual property, data privacy) and are often called upon to read and operationalize legal documents, research and analyze legal and ethical issues, recognize and mitigate risks, and communicate responsibilities and findings both internally and externally to their organizations. Job titles vary by industry and may include business analyst, compliance director or officer, contracts officer, purchasing manager, financial managers, health care administrator, auditors, buyers and purchasing agents, environmental scientists, and human resource professionals.

Q: What's the difference between someone with an MS in Legal Studies and a person with a JD who is a practicing attorney?

A: A person with an MSLS (or equivalent degree) does not have a Juris Doctorate and cannot sit for the bar exam, and therefore, cannot practice law, go before a judge as a lawyer, or solicit clients. Instead, they most often work for a company or nonprofit and focus on a specific area, such as compliance or data privacy. They may interface with lawyers inside and/or outside the organization, and thus, identifying legal issues and effectively communicating with lawyers is important to fulfill their job responsibilities.

Q: What's the difference between someone with an MS in Legal Studies and a person who is a paralegal?

A: Paralegals typically work directly for lawyers and help prepare motions, draft petitions, research for trials and meetings, and may also help communicate with clients for the purpose of information gathering. Their work is supervised and approved by practicing attorneys. Educational and training requirements for paralegals vary by state.

Q: What's the difference between someone with an MS in Legal Studies and a person who has a Master of Laws (LLM)?

A: An LLM allows a person with a Juris Doctorate to specialize in an advanced area of study. Topics are many and include intellectual property, taxation, regulation, health law, international law, law and government, legislation, tribal policy, agriculture, employment, litigation management, banking, environmental law, business, artificial intelligence, human rights, and insurance law. While there is some overlap between topics offered for an LLM and those offered in MS LS and equivalent degrees, the LLM is aimed to persons with a JD who practice as attorneys.

Q: Who is the intended student for MTSU's proposed MS LS? How will the degree be marketed?

A: As discussed in the LON and NAPP documents reviewed and supported by THEC staff, MTSU plans to take advantage of the strong work force in the Middle Tennessee region and the desire of local employers to see their mid- and upper- level management better trained in regulated industries, like compliance, copyright, finance, etc. The expressed desire of industry partners is to maximize the value of current employees by helping them upskill their current talents with legal and affiliated knowledge.

MTSU has heard from many potential students for the pending MS LS, including a person who works for a county planning department; a paralegal; an organization's vice president who works with grant development and special projects; a prevention specialist; a university professor; a higher education contracts administrator; and a director of construction administration. Many of them are looking to attain a first or second master's degree.

The MS LS at MTSU will be housed in the Jones College of Business and includes three concentrations: (a) Anti-Money Laundering, Fraud, and Compliance; (b) Business Law; and (c) Entertainment. The Entertainment concentration will be overseen by faculty and administration in the College of Media and Entertainment and will be the first of its kind in the United States. This Entertainment offering will be unique to MTSU and will play on the strengths of Nashville and the Middle Tennessee region.

Since the degree requires some in-person coursework, most of the advertising will be focused regionally for people who are within driving distance of the Nashville School of Law. Phase I of the marketing plan involves awareness and preparation, which will include press releases, LinkedIn Outreach, True Blue TV, and Google Search Ads. Phase II is engagement and lead generation with social media ads and email marketing. Phase III is for conversion and final push with webinars and information sessions. Advertising will make it clear that the MS in Legal Studies is not intended for people who want to be lawyers and practice law. It *is* intended for people who already hold undergraduate degrees and whose careers *intersect* with the law.

Q: How can we be certain that a graduate from MTSU's MS Legal Studies program won't misrepresent their credential on the job market?

A: From the time of recruitment, the MS LS will be promoted as a degree for nonlawyers, just like it is at University of Tennessee Knoxville and Vanderbilt University. In fact, there is no reverse transfer agreement with Nashville School of Law for the 22 CH that MS LS students take at MTSU. Additionally, MS LS students are not required to take the legal entrance exam for admission to the degree program, nor will they be eligible to sit for the bar exam at the completion of their MS LS degree. One of the required courses for students in every concentration is a 3-credit hour Legal Ethics course, where students will be reminded of their professional and ethical responsibilities, which demands honestly representing professional and academic credentials.

Q: What do Bar Associations and the Board of Professional Responsibilities of the Supreme Court of Tennessee have to say about these degrees?

A: Please note that the link to the list of non-JD degrees provided in the footnote of this document is hosted on the American Bar Association website. Although the ABA does not accredit or officially approve anything but JD degrees, they are obviously aware of the Legal Studies degrees and are not actively discouraging anyone from pursuing them. The Board of Professional Responsibility will have no oversight over persons receiving this degree because they will not be licensed attorneys.

Q: What is the history of and enrollment for the two existing MS LS degree programs in Tennessee?

A: There are currently two other in-state universities offering MLS Legal Studies degrees – Vanderbilt University and University of Tennessee Knoxville. Both have been launched their offerings within the past five years.

Marketing of the Vanderbilt degree, which is completely online, is managed by AllCampus. Although Vanderbilt would not share their enrollment or interest data with MTSU, AllCampus assured MTSU administrators that Vanderbilt's MLS numbers are healthy.

UTK's application, enrollment, and graduation numbers are below. Seventy-four students are enrolled in their MLS degree this semester. The numbers have consistently trended upward in the history of the degree.

Calendar Year	Submitted Applications	Spring Enrollment Total	Summer Enrollment Total	Fall Enrollment Total	Graduation
2025	35*	74	5*	*7	*6
2024	72	36	32	63	15
2023	20	20	10	28	8
2022	8	13	11	20	5
2021	12	3	5	10	2

*As of 02/20/25

Job placement data was requested of UTK by MTSU on 02/28/25 but was not available. According to analysis by AllCampus sent to MTSU in late February 2025, there were 219K job postings for MS LS skills nationally in 2024, of which 15K were in the four-state region (Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee) and 4K were in Tennessee. They reported the median MLS-related annual salary at \$78,000, with the top three industries as government, health care and social assistance, and manufacturing.

FMI: Dr. Amy Aldridge, MTSU Vice Provost for Academic Programs, amy.aldridge@mtsu.edu

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