

A Promise Kept

Students remain at the top of Authement's priority list

STUDENTS FIRST. That's a pledge Dr. Ray Authement made when he became president-elect of the university in July 1973. He was speaking to an early orientation and registration session for freshmen who would enter the University of Southwestern Louisiana a couple of months later.

He has honored that commitment, according to many former students and colleagues. "I don't think there's much that students asked for that he didn't give," said



University President Dr. Ray Authement gives a student an apple on the first day of the Fall 2006 semester. For many years, he and other UL Lafayette administrators have welcomed students back to campus each fall by handing out water, fruit and doughnuts.

Raymond Blanco, UL Lafayette's vice president for Student Affairs.

During his 33 years as president, Authement has stayed in touch with students, formally and informally. He has provided scholarships to as many qualified students as he could and has helped keep tuition as low as possible. Along the way, he has influenced countless young men and women through his guidance.

One constant in Authement's presidency has been a standing meeting with Student Government Association leaders each week.

Sarah Berthelot, chief of philanthropy at United Way of Acadiana and president of Junior League of Lafayette, was SGA president for the 2005-06 term. So, she met with the president regularly.

"Dr. Authement listened to concerns and most often, entertained solutions provided through the student perspective," she said. "For the record, I never got a 'No.' On all occasions, he would immediately pick up the phone or send a memo to respond to our concerns. . . This accessibility enhanced the abilities of the SGA to represent the concerns of students."

She recalled meeting with Authement for the first time as SGA president. "I was rather nervous about requesting to move offices serving students with disabilities to another location due to issues with a handicap lift. I knew it was a big request but it was a serious issue presented by several students.

"Doc had assembled all representatives from the administration who worked directly with that office to hear our concerns. We presented our information and then Dr. Authement asked the office to move to increase accessibility and asked for everyone's support. At that moment, I understood the value Dr. Authement placed on the 'student voice.' "

For many years, the president has

informally greeted students on the first day of class of the fall semester. Along with other university officials, he stood on the corner of Rex Street and St. Mary Boulevard to hand out free doughnuts, fresh fruit and bottled water.

Sometimes, he worked the sidewalk like a dignified carnival barker. "It's the only free thing you'll get on campus this year," he would joke to students walking past, or "I was up all night baking these doughnuts!"

Authement began his career as a physics lab instructor, while a senior majoring in physics at SLI. After earning master's and doctoral degrees in mathematics, he taught at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, La., and McNeese State University in Lake Charles, La. He returned to SLI in September 1957 as an associate professor of mathematics. He was named a professor two years later and continued to teach until 1966, when he was promoted to academic vice president.

Della Bonnette, UL Lafayette's vice president for Information Technology, was a student in one of his math classes. "He would write a math proof on the blackboard, stand aside and ask the class, 'Isn't that beautiful?'" she said in a 1997 interview.

Authement was named a University of Southwestern Louisiana Foundation Honors Professor in 1965.

He had the most interaction with students from 1966 to 1970, when he was USL's academic vice president, and from 1970 to 1973, as vice president. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of major social change in the United States. Students on university campuses across the nation were discussing and debating issues such as the Vietnam War, race relations, Watergate and marijuana use. There were a few students demonstrations on USL's campus then.

Authement's wife, Barbara, said students would sometimes go to the Authements' house on campus to meet with him after USL had closed for the day. "They would come to talk and leave at 5 o'clock in the morning. We'd stay up all night with them," she said.

There were other times when students showed up unexpectedly on the Authements' doorstep to celebrate. In the 1980s, for example, a Student Government Association referendum calling for USL's name to be changed to the University of Louisiana was approved by students. About 50 students wanted to share the victory with Authement.

"We opened the door and there they stood. So, we pulled out all the snacks in the house and fed them," she said.

Authement inherited a problem that stemmed from USL's rapid growth after World War II ended – more cars than parking spaces on campus. "A class boycott and demonstration in front of Martin Hall have been called for Wednesday to protest the lack of action by the University administration on the traffic and parking situation on campus," stated the lead story on Page One of the Nov. 1, 1974, issue of *The Vermilion* USL's student newspaper.

A photo on the front page of the Nov.

8, 1974, issue of *The Vermilion* shows Authement being presented with a giant replica of a parking ticket during a protest that drew more than 200 students.

University officials implemented "parking lot control methods" that designated which cars could park in certain parking lots. In 1976, a shuttle system was introduced. Students parked their vehicles by Blackham Coliseum and were transported to campus by bus. Parking was later moved to Cajun Field's parking lot. In 1983, a lottery was created to give students a chance to "win" a prime spot to park on campus.

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under construction at the intersection of St. Mary Boulevard and Taft Street.

Throughout his career, Authement has particularly empathized with students who are the first in their families to attend a university. “I was a first generation student, so I know what they feel. I’ve always tried to represent them in the best way that I could,” he said in an interview with *La Louisiane*.

The university president has also

caused by fluctuating state revenues. From 1982 to 1988, during the Oil Bust in Louisiana, USL suffered eight budget cuts totaling about \$10 million, for instance.

He has stressed maintaining the university’s budget in ways that would impact students the least, such as controlling administrative costs and limiting the amount spent on maintenance and repairs. In 1993, for example, USL faculty, staff and administrators served

for years – in Louisiana,” she said.

Soon after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated south Louisiana in the fall of 2005, Gov. Kathleen Blanco announced a freeze on state spending. Officials needed to assess the storms’ impact on the state’s finances.

“I was scheduled to speak to a group of parents. So I went to Dr. Authement beforehand and asked, ‘What can I tell them about scholarship offers for the 2006-07 school year?’ He said, ‘You can tell them that I’m going to do everything in my power to keep the offers the same that we have in the past few years.’” Bulliard said.

Authement’s daughter, Julie Authement Johnson, said her father’s own experience as a student motivated him to help others. “Academically it came easy to him, but financially, just to stay in school every day was a struggle, to have enough money to buy books to be able to study. You have to know that hunger for education and hunger to learn. I think that translates now into his desire to see everybody have access to education.”

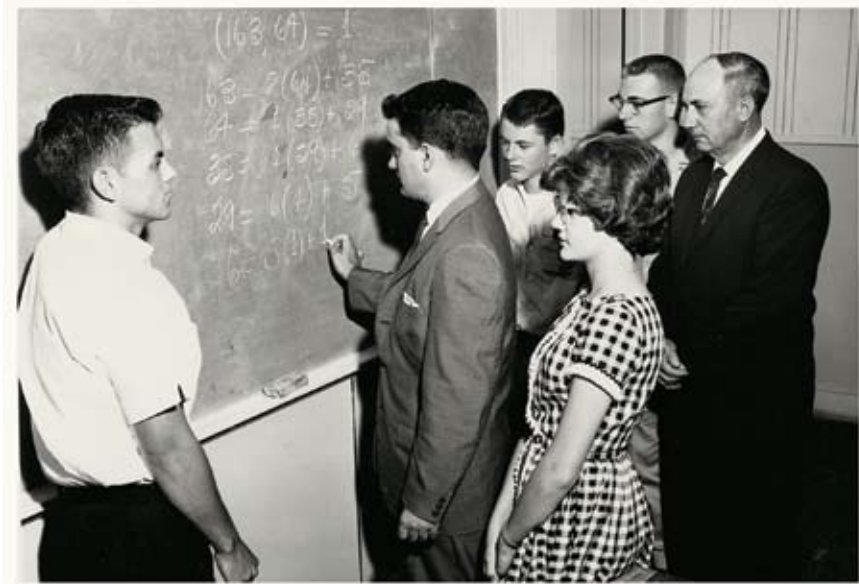
Providing access for students has not only been linked to financial assistance. In the 1970s, for example, the university offered some classes on a special schedule to accommodate people who worked in the oil field “seven and seven.” They worked offshore for seven days and then returned to land for seven days off.

Also, after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita shut down colleges and universities in south Louisiana, Authement extended the registration deadline at UL Lafayette. About 800 displaced students signed up for classes.

It’s impossible to determine how many individual students Authement has helped over the years. But sometimes he’ll mention the success of former students, such as Paul Cloutier. Authement was a math professor at SLI when Cloutier was attending high school in Opelousas, La. One of Cloutier’s teachers recognized he had exceptional talent; she asked Authement to meet with him.

Authement also saw Cloutier’s potential. So, he gave the young man a couple of computer kits.

“Computers were just coming out then...You could buy a little computer kit for \$60 or \$70. You could wire it and energize it with batteries and it could



Ray Authement shows students a mathematical formula. He earned a bachelor’s degree in physics from Southwestern Louisiana Institute in 1950. After obtaining master’s and doctoral degrees, he taught at LSU in Baton Rouge, La., and McNeese State University in Lake Charles, La., from 1954 to 1957.

COURTESY OF UL ARCHIVES

related to students who have struggled financially to attend UL Lafayette.

He grew up in Boudreaux Canal, a small fishing community just a few miles north of Cocodrie, La., near the coast. He saw how hard his parents worked to support him and his five brothers and sisters. Neither of his parents had advanced beyond the 7th grade but they believed education was the ticket to an easier, more prosperous life.

Authement remembers asking his father whether, after graduating from Terrebone High School, he should stay home to help with the family business or seek a job elsewhere. His father insisted that he go to college. “I said, ‘We can’t afford it.’ Dad said, ‘We’ll afford it.’”

So, Authement entered SLI in 1947 with a small scholarship.

During his presidency, Authement has faced many financial challenges

twice as many students per employee as the national average, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Education.

Today, UL Lafayette’s tuition is one of the lowest in the nation, thanks to comprehensive scholarship and financial aid programs, including out-of-state fee waivers to qualified students.

Adele Bulliard, director of UL Lafayette’s Scholarship Office, said Authement’s commitment to helping students financially is evidenced by the number and total dollar amount of scholarships awarded. For the past seven or eight years, he has made sure that every UL Lafayette student who was eligible and applied for a scholarship, received one – even if they weren’t all large amounts.

“We’re the only university in the state that does this. He’s very proud of that. And I would say that we make some of the best scholarship offers – and have



Former SGA President Sarah Berthelot, Dr. Ray Authement and Former SGA President Shawn Wilson.

PHILIP GOULD

add, subtract and multiply. I thought Paul was someone who would enjoy that,” Authement said in a 2004 interview.

Cloutier connected the kits and figured out how to use the computers to make the phone ring, creating a primitive computerized phone system. He had offers to attend MIT, Cal-Tech and Princeton after graduating from high school, but he chose to enroll at SLI instead.

Cloutier went on to become principal investigator of 13 NASA ionospheric sounding rocket probes. He was lead investigator on the Pioneer Venus Bus and Orbiter Ion Mass Spectrometer experiments.

Shawn Wilson is another student who was influenced by Authement. He’s a confidential assistant in the Office of the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development. He served as USL’s Student Government Association president in 1994 and was elected president of the UL Lafayette Alumni Association in 2004.

Wilson said Authement treated him and other student leaders with respect. “He allowed us to disagree, he allowed us to object and he also allowed us to make mistakes. . . He never strong-armed me or other students and I’ve been pretty close to other past SGA presidents and past Alumni Association presidents.”

Wilson noted that Authement was always thinking ahead. “Many days, I’d go into his office – about to ask for something – and he would already know what I was going to

ask. He would already be committed to say ‘No, and this is why,’ or ‘Yes, and here’s how I’m going to help you.’ I’ve never known him to absolutely say flat out ‘No,’ without an alternative or a better option made available. He will always find a way to achieve your goal, maybe not with your strategy.”

As a USL student, Wilson worked with Authement to secure financing for construction of the Student Aquatic Center on campus. Students approved a self-assessed fee that ultimately funded it. The center opened in 2002.

Wilson said Authement showed him how to “stay focused on a long term vision and not let it change the lenses that I use to see the present environment.”

When Authement was dealing with a controversial matter, Wilson assumed it would dominate the president’s attention. “But there were other issues of advancement for this institution that he was very much focused on. That, in and of itself, is a tremendous skill and gift and talent. It’s so easy to be distracted by what’s right in front of you that you forget about where you’re trying to end up at the end of the day.”

Berthelot said she treasures a letter Authement sent to her as she neared the end of her term as SGA president. “He expressed his gratitude for my service and well wishes for the future. I have placed it next to my diploma because the education I received while solving student problems – through collaborations such as Doc’s – was also an education in itself.” ■

On the Lighter Side

How much do you know about UL Lafayette President Dr. Ray Authement? Test your knowledge by taking this quiz. Here’s a clue: The correct answers may surprise you.

1. Dr. Clyde Rougeou, UL Lafayette’s fourth president, gave Authement this nickname:

- T-Ray
- Stud
- Buddy

2. The president does not have one of these in his office in Martin Hall:

- bookcase
- potted plant
- computer

3. Authement collects:

- chess sets
- dimes
- calculators

4. He has never traveled to:

- Europe
- Washington, D.C.
- California

5. The president likes to tell:

- knock-knock jokes
- Boudreaux/Thibodeaux jokes
- ghost stories

6. He once planned to become:

- a priest
- a chef
- an engineer

7. What does he speak fluently?

- Pig Latin
- French
- Spanish

8. Which of these sports did Authement play in high school?

- football
- soccer
- squash

9. To unwind after a stressful workday, he likes to:

- work a crossword puzzle
- try to solve mathematical puzzles
- cook

10. He hates to:

- have his photo taken
- attend Ragin’ Cajun basketball games
- go fishing

Answers: 1. b 2. c 3. b 4. a 5. b 6. c 7. b 8. a 9. b 10. a