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FSU med school in the business of delivering doctors

By [Doug Blackburn](#)
Democrat senior writer
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Her mother calls Laura Davis "just a regular, small-town girl."

There are other ways to describe Davis, a third-year medical school student at Florida State University. She is, by all accounts, a poster child for the still-young College of Medicine and its particular mission to produce primary-care physicians working in under-served areas.

"Laura definitely fulfills that scenario. She is a great fit for us," said Dr. Paul McLeod, dean of FSU's Pensacola campus, where Davis is spending her last two years of medical school.

Davis is a native of Blountstown. She was born in Calhoun-Liberty General Hospital, a small, rural facility that stopped doing deliveries in the late '80s.

She says she's still not sure what specialty she wants to pursue during her residency — she's torn between family medicine and obstetrics, at the moment — but Davis is clearly headed toward a career in primary-care medicine. And there's a good chance she will wind up back in Blountstown, where the youngest doctor is in his mid-40s, and it's quite possible that by the time Davis completes her residency, he will be the only physician still working in the Panhandle community.

Davis knows all too well she is eagerly wanted and needed in her hometown. She's reminded every time she returns to see her parents, Vicki and Eddie Davis.

"Every time I go home, I hear, 'When are you going to come back here to practice medicine?' I honestly don't know if I'll come back right after residency," Davis said, "but my family is a really big part of my life.

"I don't think I have pressure-pressure. I don't think I would be letting anybody down if I don't come back, but part of it is self-imposed. Blountstown is a small community. Everybody is invested in everybody else."

Davis, 28, is a devout Baptist who was never on a fast-track to a career as a doctor. She admits she didn't know if she had the right stuff when she graduated high school. She spent her first two years of college in Chipola before finishing at the University of

West Florida with a major in mathematics.

Davis worked as a substitute teacher in Calhoun County Schools, where her mother is assistant superintendent. Then she took an office job at a fertility clinic in Gulf Breeze, which inspired her to try medical school.

"I realized I wanted to be on the other side of the desk. It was good for me to be in that environment and see how it worked. It confirmed for me that medicine was what I wanted to do."

Davis wasn't sure if her test scores were good enough for a spot at FSU, which was just reaching full capacity after opening in 2000. She was admitted into the school's Bridge Program in 2008, a year-long path designed to ease the transition into the rigors of the four-year medical school track. She also picked up a couple of scholarships to make paying for medical school less of a burden.

"I had to learn how to study all over again," she said. "Studying for medical school is much different than studying for undergraduate."

"Most of the people who are in medical school are in the top of that Bell curve. They told us during the first week it is like trying to get a sip of water from a fire hose. You have to learn that first semester how to study."

McLeod, the dean of her regional campus, believes Davis is a model student.

"Don't let her fool you. She has plenty of talent. She has mastered the content of every clerkship she's been in," he said. "If there were a profile of the type of student we are looking for who may return to an under-served area, she is a great fit. She has maturity and quiet leadership skills."

Davis is by no means the first medical student at FSU to focus on primary care. It's become one of the college's strengths. FSU graduates who have completed family practice residencies are in Bonifay, Crestview and Marianna, for example.

The Council on Graduate Medical Education reports that fewer than 20 percent of all U.S. medical school graduates are choosing primary care specialties, but 55 percent of the 450 graduates of FSU's College of Medicine have gone into primary-care residency programs. FSU includes obstetrics-gynecology when it reports primary-care numbers, arguing that the battle to improve infant mortality in North Florida falls under primary care.

Dr. Jerry Skipper, a family physician who now works in the emergency room at the hospital in Blountstown, is among those hoping Davis will return to her hometown. Skipper, 42, knows the Davis family through First Baptist Church. He says new blood is definitely needed.

"We need some younger ones coming on. The fact that she's from here is a huge plus. She knows the people and the limitations of our area," Skipper said. "You have no back-up here. We're an hour from anybody."

"I don't want her to feel pressure. I don't want her to come back because she thinks we expect it. Wherever she goes, she will be an asset to the folks in that community."

Davis' mother echoed that sentiment.

"Laura needs to make the decision for herself if she is going to come back or not," Vicki Davis said. "I think she will, but it's got to be her decision."

Davis knows she's wanted — and needed — in Blountstown.

"It's a strong pull," she said. "I can certainly see myself going home to practice medicine."