Liberia is a small English-speaking post-conflict country in west Africa. In 2011, the country ranked 182 out of 187 countries and territories in the Human Development Index, a measure that combines life expectancy, income, and educational attainment. Despite this ranking, the Liberian government has set a goal to achieve middle income status by 2030 and had been making great strides in health and development prior to the Ebola outbreak in 2014.

According UNAIDS (2016), the HIV prevalence for adults ages 15-49 years is 1.1% in Liberia, and is estimated to be between 2.5-2.9% in the capital city of Monrovia. About 26.6% of eligible adults are receiving antiretroviral therapy (UNAIDS, 2015) in Liberia. HIV-related stigma and discrimination is another major barrier preventing individuals from knowing their HIV status and utilizing HIV care and services (UNAIDS, 2016). The limited capacity of the healthcare system in Liberia due infrastructure, geographic disproportions in access, inadequate supply and management of essential medical supplies, and number of skilled healthcare professionals impede effective HIV care and treatment (UNAIDS, 2016). Strengthening linkages and collaborative mechanisms is an essential component to strengthening HIV care in Liberia.

Mother Patern College of Health Sciences (MPCHS) in Monrovia, Liberia has a record of high quality nursing education as demonstrated in multiple national and international reviews (USAID, UMSON) of the school and its curriculum, faculty and facilities. MPCHS was founded in 1989 by the Catholic Archdiocese of Monrovia under the leadership of Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis. MPCHS has long been committed to improving the capacity of the entire healthcare workforce in Liberia as demonstrated by its programs for nurses, physician assistants, midwives, laboratory technicians, and nurse educators. MPCHS is a nursing leader and the only college offering a master’s degree to the country. MPCHS initiated a collaborative partnership with University of Maryland School of Nursing in 2010 and signed a memorandum of understanding in 2012.

The overall goal of this project is to identify the obstacles to retention in care among adults living with HIV in Monrovia, Liberia through an interprofessional learning experience. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the intrapersonal, interpersonal/social, and system barriers to
adherence and retention in care among adults living with HIV in a developing country in sub-Saharan Africa.

The objectives for this project are the following:

1) Perform an interprofessional, organizational assessment of existing HIV care and services at MPCHS and affiliated St. Joseph’s Catholic Hospital clinic using a pre-existing tool;
2) Examine provider perceptions of barriers and facilitators to retention in care for persons living with HIV through focus group discussions, interviews and/or surveys; and
3) Examine patient perceptions of barriers and facilitators to retention in care for persons living with HIV through focus group discussions and interviews.

Expected Outcomes: UMB students and faculty will gain insight into the cross-cultural context of the HIV continuum and intrapersonal, social, and systemic influences on retaining individuals in care and community level interventions which can help address this issue.

UMB students will 1) develop enhanced appreciation of inter-professional learning/clinical practice and the unique skills/contribution that each discipline brings to the care of individuals living with HIV, and 2) practice interprofessional teamwork in a low-resource international setting.

Our Liberian partners will gain insight into barriers which influence retention in care among the targeted population, and hopefully be able to use information from this project to strengthen their programs and facilitate discussions on strategies to address the findings.

Pre-departure: UMSON’s Office of Global Health (OGH) will facilitate 3 in-person and 2 virtual team meetings prior to departure, supplemented with on-going Blackboard communication. Students will engage in a range of learning experiences, including discussions, readings, and individual and group exercises that cultivate self-directed/self-reflective activities and collaborative skills. Students will be required to attend two orientation sessions held by the Center for Global Education Initiatives.

Special requirement: UMB’s safety and security service, International SOS, lists Liberia as an extreme medical risk destination due to the shortage of medical resources available locally. Therefore, students selected for this project will be required to have a medical exam before they are approved to travel to Liberia to ensure that all medical concerns are taken into consideration before deciding to participate in this project.