

2015 Faculty Convocation

Friday, August 21, 2015

Thank you, and good morning. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the start of the 2015-16 academic year on the campus of East Tennessee State University. I trust that you share my sentiments that this is simply a magical time of year, and other than Commencement, no period on the calendar matches the excitement and energy of late August, not even snow days.

I want to begin by extending a special welcome to the 75 new faculty members who join the ETSU family today. I had the opportunity to meet many of you last week at Shelbridge; we are honored that you have chosen to make ETSU your new academic home. I am also honored to welcome all of our returning faculty back to campus. Many of you spent the summer teaching, leading study abroad trips, caring for your patients, or engaged in research. Regardless of your academic

pursuits, I hope that the summer provided opportunities for renewal, reflection, and time with family.

The enthusiasm of fall is driven by the anticipation of the days and months ahead. We think about the students who will soon fill our classrooms. We think of the new research initiatives and service projects we want to pursue, as well as the relationships that will be formed with new colleagues. Today, as we look ahead to the upcoming academic year, we also pause to reflect upon our accomplishments over the past year.

For example, did you know that within the past year:

- We conferred 3,179 degrees;
- Over 3,200 students made the Dean's list this past spring;
- We hosted more than 200 arts events on our campus;
- Over 300,000 patient encounters were reported at our clinics and health care centers;

- We increased our number of academic advisors across campus by 14;
- Over 900 students participated in an honors enrichment experience offered by our Honors College;
- Sixteen students were commissioned as 2nd lieutenants through our ROTC program, and seven graduates from the Quillen College of Medicine were commissioned into a branch of the military; and
- That 10 athletes from Team USA trained at our Olympic Training Site?

These are just a few of the informational items included in our 2014-15 annual report, which you will receive a copy of as you leave today. This document is filled with numbers – numbers that tell an impressive story of how we as an institution have progressed during the past year, and numbers that provide a framework for how we are inspiring and influencing the lives of our students. I am very proud of that story, and I want to thank everyone here today for your

commitment to ETSU and our mission of stewardship of place.

Traditionally, our Faculty Convocation has been the setting for the president to deliver the State of the University Address. In keeping with the precedent that was established last year, I would like to use much of our time together today to focus on the faculty, with a spotlight on excellence in the classroom.

The formal State of the University Address will occur later this semester on Friday, October 2, at 12:30 p.m. here in the Culp Auditorium. I invite all of you to join me that day as I provide an update on initiatives and future plans for the university. October 2nd has special significance, as that is the day that marks the 104th anniversary of when we opened our doors as East Tennessee State Normal School.

Though my address will come in a few weeks, I will exercise executive privilege to provide an update on matters related to our budget and enrollment. Two years ago, I stood

here and outlined our budget situation and discussed a number of steps that we needed to take in order to adjust for declining enrollments, correct long-standing structural budget deficits, and respond to significant reductions in state funding. Together, we rolled up sleeves and went to work.

Today, I am pleased to report that not only did we finish the 2014-15 year with a balanced budget, but we were able to put funds back into institutional reserves. Even though we face budget uncertainties, we are finding ways to invest in the most precious resource at our university, that being our faculty and staff. This fall, all faculty and staff will receive a two percent across the board salary enhancement. Additionally, we will increase stipend levels for our graduate students. Your October paychecks will reflect this increase, which will be retroactive to July 1. I am committed to our salary equity goals and intend to build on this base in future academic years.

I am also pleased to report that enrollment for the semester is strong and we remain within our budget

confidence intervals. While the number of Tennesseans attending ETSU has declined for a variety of external public policy initiatives, we experienced growth in out-of-state students, particularly those that were eligible for the George L. Carter scholarships. The freshmen who enter your classrooms next week are academically competitive, and the GPA for the freshman class is almost a tenth of a point higher than last year. Furthermore, we have experienced pronounced growth in our graduate programs, which is a reflection of the quality of those programs. I will provide a complete update on budgets and enrollment during the state of the university address.

From the very first day our doors opened, we have been an institution focused upon excellence in the classroom. When I speak to our graduates, whether it be at alumni golf tournaments, community events, through email or even on Twitter, they speak with passion about their favorite professors. I hear of giants in our history, names such as Dr.

Jack Higgs, Dr. Willene Paxton, Dr. Dorman Stout, Dr. Tom Jenrette, the late Dr. Marjorie King, the late Dave Walker, or the late Dr. William Mayberry. These, and many other retired faculty, left a legacy for those that follow defined by outstanding teaching and a commitment to student success.

I hear similar stories from students about our current faculty. In the time I have remaining, I want to share just a few of those stories with you. Decades from now, these faculty will be talked about with reverence for they inspired and shaped the lives of future alumni.

There are stories of faculty like **Dr. Ryan Nivens** from the Clemmer College of Education, who students say makes math “fun and cool.” Our teacher candidates tell us that Dr. Nivens provides them with a strong understanding of math concepts and empowers them to become effective math teachers.

Whether it is teaching nursing students about medication-dosage calculations or Pathophysiology, or leading the Adult

Practicum or simulation exercises, **Rhonda Broderick** is known as one of the best. Students tell us that she is able to take concepts that are very complex and break them down into simplified pieces and then connect them together. She inspires her students and plays a critical role in preparing them for a career of service.

Any student at ETSU wanting to go to law school will seek the counsel of **Dr. Colin Glennon** from our Department of Political Science. Dr. Glennon is the pre-law advisor and also coordinates our legal studies minor. I have sat in his classroom and watched him teach with passion about our representative democracy (and all of its warts) and assure you that his students are informed and engaged.

And there is also our own graduate, **Dr. Kellie Price-Rhea**, who is now a faculty member in the College of Business and Technology. She has won the college's teaching award on more than one occasion and recently helped launch the new master's degree program in digital marketing. You

may have seen Dr. Price-Rhea on some of our television spots promoting the university.

One of the first faculty members our new medical students meet is **Dr. Caroline Abercrombie**, who teaches the Gross Anatomy course and also helps students transition from the basic science courses to the clinical-based setting. She is described as a great mentor who is always looking for ways to enhance learning opportunities. And, she has to put up with Dr. Kwasigroch's shoes every day.

Dr. Brooks Pond has the distinction of teaching one of the hardest courses first-year pharmacy students must take. But she is also known for investing countless hours with students outside of class, helping them be successful no matter how much time it takes. Her list of teaching awards from her students is an indication of how much she is valued.

Dr. Craig Wassinger in our physical therapy program has been lauded for his innovative teaching style and for bringing evidence-based practices into the classroom. His

students credit his classroom communication and organizational skills as fundamental traits that make learning from him seem easy, even when applying difficult material.

Many of our nursing, physical therapy, and other health professions students learned the fundamentals of anatomy and physiology from **Julie Bowers**, who has taught in our Department of Health Sciences for over 20 years. Throughout her time at ETSU, Julie has been recognized by her peers for excellence, as she has received numerous teaching awards.

I could stand here all day relating the stories from our students of the faculty members who have had a transformative influence on their lives. That is a trait that speaks to who we are collectively as an institution. We are blue collar, but we set gold standards. We make dreams happen. We transform lives.

In closing, I want to share a story about a student whose life was touched by our faculty. Mike Dalka was a non-traditional student, a Vietnam veteran, and a special someone

who took an interest in ETSU. Mike audited courses here for nearly 20 years. Many of those were history courses taught by faculty such as Dr. Doug Burgess, Dr. Elwood Watson and Dr. Dorothy Drinkard. Mike was not afraid to raise his hand in class to provoke conversations and friendly debate. When he received a cancer diagnosis this spring, he wasn't left with much time, but he continued to audit courses. In fact, he took a course during the first term of the summer session while he was battling cancer. Before he died, he brought his family to campus so he could show them the place and the people that he loved.

It will be different walking through the cafeteria this fall and not seeing his smiling face. Mike believed that the truly educated never graduate. He loved ETSU and our faculty, for they kept alive in him the joy of learning. I share his story as an example of how each of you have a profound influence on the lives of our students in ways you may never know.

Across this campus you will see banners that read “Graduation Begins Today.” Each time that I see those banners I am reminded that as we walk to our classrooms and offices, we take steps that assist students along their path to a degree. Every time we enter the classroom, advise students, mentor them in the laboratory, supervise their internships, or simply answer their questions on email, we assist them in the realization of their dreams.

Every student at ETSU comes here with dreams for a better future. Many are the first in their family to attend college. Many, like Mike Dalka, are non-traditional students pursuing better career opportunities or the life of the mind. Thank you for all that you do to help our students realize their dreams, and thank you for all that you will do this upcoming year to transform the lives of our students whose path toward graduation begins today. Thank you, Godspeed, and Go Bucs!