



**East Tennessee State University
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Faculty Convocation Address
“Stepping Forward Together”

Friday, August 20, 2021
Martin Center for the Arts

Brian Noland
President

Good morning. It is my distinct honor and privilege to welcome you to the start of the fall semester on the beautiful campus of East Tennessee State University. I have looked forward to this moment for long time. It is the opportunity to gather together as faculty and as family and to “Step Forward Together” as we reengage with our colleagues. I cannot put into words what it is like to be here at this moment as we move forward to the fall semester.

This morning we gather in celebration and anticipation. Those who have the privilege to work in the academy know that nothing matches the excitement of being on a college campus in August as our students and our faculty return for the academic year. The sense of renewal, magic, and, most importantly, hope, has invigorated this institution for the past 110 years.

Today is a celebration of those who have sparked that magic and sustained that hope. Today is an opportunity to welcome new faculty to our university. Today, 20 new tenure-track faculty begin their first semester at our university. I trust that each of you will find your journey to be as transformative as

mine has been. This institution has changed my life and the life of my family and I am confident that as you move through your career it will have a similar transformative impact on you.

Today we celebrate faculty members the who have achieved the highest honors that the university can bestow upon members of the faculty; And we honor faculty earning Emeritus status as their careers turn a page and they begin the next chapter.

In many respects, today is a celebration of dreams being realized. This building is something this community has dreamed of for more than four decades. It was a dream of Jim and Mary B. Martin. It was a dream of Jim and Sandy Powell. It was a dream of Dr. Bert Bach. These three families, and countless others, helped to make this building a reality through their support for the Arts at ETSU.

Two years ago, when we gathered at the Millennium Center for our 2019 Faculty Convocation on August 23rd, I told you that the next time we gathered for Convocation, it would at the Martin Center for the Arts. Technically, I held true to that promise, even though the events of the past year presented somewhat of a delay. I hope that you share my pride as I look across this beautiful room and as I walk through this building. This building will be a venue to make dreams come true for our community, as well as for our students and faculty. To everyone who was part of making this dream a reality, I thank you.

Today is also a celebration of the resilience and collaboration that has defined our community over the past 18 months. Together we persevered and we remained engaged as a campus. We made sacrifices to keep each other safe. We put others before self, and we worked tirelessly to ensure that our students continued their education journeys. We stood together, as one, grounded in our historic mission.

I would like to thank you for your collective efforts to improve the quality of life for the people of our region. ETSU is the engine that powers the culture, the economy, and the health of our region. We are in the dream business, and we make dreams come true on a daily basis.

These dreams sometimes present themselves in ways that you do not see, but they carry forward in our community in a powerful way. When a teacher walks into a first-grade classroom to teach students the joy of reading he is carrying forward a dream that you imparted in him because the majority of faculty who teach in the K-12 setting in our community were educated here. When one of our medical residents informs a patient that their surgery was successful and that they will not require chemotherapy, that is a dream carried forward from you because many of the health care providers in this region graduated from ETSU. Those dreams become a reality at our audiology clinic as patients come from all over the region to receive Cochlear implants, and ultimately, the gift of hearing the voices of loved ones for the first time. Those dreams and those actions that you take carry forward in ways that you sometimes do not know. None of us do.

This morning as I was eating breakfast, Donna handed me two postcards, each with a note on the back from two students we had connected with independently, but who had come together at this institution. One is getting ready to complete medical school and would like to return here for residency. The postcard was an invitation to their wedding. All of you have received similar notes from students whose lives you have touched. Thank you for what you do to pass on the joy of education.

Sometimes I fear that we have taken these dreams for granted because we have been so focused on the pandemic and emergent issues of the day. I know I've fallen victim to that trap, sometimes approaching days from a position of worry rather than hope and optimism.

In preparation for today's address, I stepped back and did something different. I pulled out the 82 notepads that I have filled with reflections on this institution since I had the honor to become president in January 2012. Those notebooks contain stories of hope and optimism, they portray a university deeply engaged with the world around it. I would like to share some of those stories with you today.

My notepads share the stories of individuals dedicated to supporting our faculty as we navigated the dynamics of the virtual environment. They tell stories of being in meetings with Dr. Amy Johnson and her staff in the Center of Teaching Excellence. I want to thank them for their guidance, the resources and the training they provided to our faculty as we transitioned online in the blink of an eye. I also want to thank Dr. Patrick Brown and others who stepped forward as experts in online education and served as mentors to faculty who were new to this platform.

As I reflect upon my notes from 2012 to today, I am struck by a recurring theme and that is the theme of innovation. Many in business say that higher education is slow and is not adaptable, but if we have proved anything in the past 18 months, it is not only that we are nimble and adaptable, but we stay true to our mission. Faculty were innovative in the classroom and we adjusted our pedagogical techniques to meet the changing needs of students. We were innovative in our delivery mechanism, in the manner in which we advised students, and in the manner in which we engaged in service. Because of that spirit of innovation that is baked into our DNA, we were able to move forward through the unimaginable and to keep this institution progressing.

My notes contain stories of shared governance meetings. I want to thank Dr. Virginia Foley, Stephen Hendrix, and other representatives from the Faculty Senate for advocating for the faculty and presenting the unique challenges that have faced our faculty during the pandemic. In concert with the Faculty Senate, we have affirmed our commitment to academic freedom and the pedagogical rights of the faculty.

My notes from the past year tell the stories of countless planning, strategy, and crisis meetings with Drs. Leigh Johnson, Bill Block, Randy Wykoff, David Linville, Jonathan Moorman and the many providers of ETSU Health who stepped forward to lead our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through their advocacy and leadership, we navigated the complexities of the past year and now turn our efforts to promoting access to vaccinations and testing. From the beginning, leaders from ETSU Health have stood on the front lines in treating patients across our region and I send them my sincere thanks for all they have done and will continue to do as we fight COVID together. It is more than a health aspect that we are navigating as an institution, I also want to thank our dedicated staff in the Counseling Center, the Strong Brain Institute, Graduate Studies, as well as the many advisors and other mental health counselors across campus for their work throughout the year to help our students navigate the challenges of life during the pandemic. The pandemic has created a mental health crisis across our nation and our students are struggling. However, our campus has stepped forward to help, but we must and can do more.

Clearly, we have not closed the book on COVID-19. There is still uncertainty and the evolving challenges of the Delta variant have emerged across the South. I am encouraged by the uptick in vaccination rates and again I want to thank our colleagues at ETSU Health for all they are doing to provide access to these lifesaving vaccines. For those of you who have yet to receive the vaccine, I encourage you to do so as quickly as you can. In fact, we are holding a clinic this afternoon in the Culp Center in which we will provide free vaccinations. I have been vaccinated, my wife has been vaccinated and I want to thank Donna for the leadership she is providing to help push vaccines into our community. As a University, we are doing all we can within the laws of the State of Tennessee to encourage vaccinations and keep each other safe.

Now, as we turn our attention to the fall, I am excited about the opportunities in front of us. Our budget is balanced and enrollment numbers are stable thanks to the efforts of Dr. Joe Sherlin, Dr. Sharon McGee, Dr. Sam Mayhew, Heather Levesque, and staff in the Offices of Admissions, Financial Aid, Housing and Residence Life, the Graduate School, and others. We welcome a strong freshmen class, many of whom moved into the residence halls yesterday and are participating in the largest PREVIEW class in the history of our university. Our graduate enrollment is strong, and we are poised to have among the highest number of transfer students to ever arrive on campus next week. That outcome is made possible because of each of you and the leadership that you have provided in advocating for your institution.

There is more to our university than enrollment as one of the critical aspects of this institution is our research mission. Over the past year our faculty have engaged that inquiry, that question, “What if?” Research is a core part of the university, and despite the restrictions that the pandemic placed on our ability to conduct scholarly activities, we launched several new research centers over the past 18 months. The Strong Brain Institute, a collaborative initiative with Ballad Health, is leading our campus to become a more resilience-informed community. We also formally launched the Center for Cardiovascular Risks Research, the Center for Applied Research and Evaluation in Women’s Health, and the Rural Health Equity Research Center. All of these centers have a strong interdisciplinary focus and provide a setting for faculty from across campus to build collaborations.

I want to thank Dr. Bill Duncan for his longstanding leadership and Dr. Nick Hagemeyer for agreeing to serve as our interim research officer as well as his colleagues in Research and Sponsored Programs for the work they do every day to support our scientists and to foster new opportunities for our faculty and students. In the 2020 fiscal year, in the midst of a pandemic, research and sponsored activity at ETSU generated upwards of \$54 million. Additionally, I am excited by the work of the ETSU

Research Corporation to engage entrepreneurs across the region and promote innovative partnerships with business and industry.

That question, “What If?” is a question that has guided the work of our Committee for 125, from the initial committee nine years ago to Chapter Two that began this year. This strategic visioning initiative seeks to identify new opportunities to move the university forward as we approach our 125th anniversary in 2036. The committees and taskforces met throughout the summer, and this fall, I will hold town halls here on campus and across the community to obtain your feedback and input so that together we can shape the vision for the university. As we move toward my State of the University Address, we are going to transition as a campus from “what if” to “what’s next” as we begin to explore the recommendations from the Committee for 125 Chapter Two.

In conjunction with that work, now is the time for us to take a fresh look at everything we do. It is time for the university to undertake a review of university processes to ensure that we innovate and move away from “that’s the way we’ve always done it” paradigm to focus on our students to ensure the operations of the campus are more customer focused.

If I have experienced anything over the past 18 months it is the joy of watching the way in which we as an institution have stepped forward to serve. I have talked to faculty members who have told stories of holding office hours at night to accommodate students. I have spoken to faculty who have reached out to students daily who were struggling or had altogether disappeared from their classes. I ask each of you to continue to show grace toward your students who are re-acclimating this fall. Lead with compassion, kindness and flexibility, and show your students that we are a University dedicated to their success both inside and outside of the classroom. This week I observed that focus on assistance front and center. A young man riding a mower stopped to help a family moving belongings into Carter Hall, and at the orientation for graduate students I saw a member of the university community sitting beside a

graduate student helping to translate what was being said on stage. Those little things happen every day and they transform the lives of our students. That promise to reconnect, to reengage, is what the fall is about. Every time you walk into a classroom you have the

opportunity to define this institution because we have a brand-new group of freshmen who know nothing about this institution other than what you define for them. What they see, hear, and what they experience at the onset of their academic journey will define their academic journey and establish the foundation, course, and tone for their university experience. The passion for learning that you create in the hearts and minds of our incoming students will last with them for a lifetime.

This summer we had the opportunity to welcome one of those students to the institution. That student's name is Will Gott. Will is one of 14 students in our ETSU Access program which prepares individuals with intellectual learning disabilities for meaningful employment. I had the honor of being present when Will learned he was accepted to ETSU. The staff in the Clemmer College arranged for this to be a surprise for Will, and when he walked into Warf-Pickel Hall it was pure magic. Will loves theater and dance, and after signing his letter of acceptance, he decided to entertain us with his rendition of Alan Jackson's song "Little Bitty." Members of the media were present, and one of the reporters tweeted about the event. Turns out, Alan Jackson saw the tweet and sent Will a congratulatory package.

Will's story is just one of the many stories of our students who begin a new chapter in their educational journey at ETSU this fall. The next couple of weeks are going to present some challenges. There are issues that are happening across the nation and world that may cause tension in your classrooms. I implore you not to confuse noise with reality. Do not give credibility to falsehood because of the volume of the voice. Robust engagement with difficult ideas is the basic tenet of academic freedom, a concept that underlies all three elements of our academic mission. Attention to civil discourse is a critical part of the fabric of this institution. The responsibility falls to each of us to do our part in

resisting the allure of certitude. Let us seize this opportunity to teach students how to interact with one another, to be civil, to be compassionate, to be kind, and to be resilient.

A university campus should be an uplifting place. Let us continue to build a university where, around every corner, there is something that inspires us. We have one of the most beautiful campuses in the State of Tennessee, but we can make it even more spectacular, safer, with spaces that encourages us all to slow down, to enjoy the natural beauty that surrounds us, and to enjoy the company of our students and colleagues.

I believe that if you surround students with beautiful things in beautiful settings, they will dream the unimaginable. Not only must we build an engaged campus, we must build an engaging one. And we are well on our way, from this building, to current renovations to Lamb Hall, to the pending construction of a new academic building in the center of the campus, to the University Commons, and to the renovations made in Gilbreath Hall and the Culp Student Center, we are reshaping our campus. Let us continue to reshape the university into a place that draws you in and never lets go—a campus that engages you for life.

The stories of our university are rich, complex, and diverse. As demonstrated in our opening convocation video, we are more than words, we are a collection of scholars, and we are a collection of departments and colleges that come together to change the lives of the people of this region. I thank you for the inspiring and far-reaching work that you will do every day. I thank you for the patience you are going to exhibit with one another, your students, and every member of the university community, as we navigate the next couple of months. May this semester be a sense of renewed engagement for us all.

Stay safe. Get vaccinated. Godspeed and Go Bucs!