

Fall 2019 Faculty Convocation Address
Friday, August 23, 2019

Thank you and good morning. It is my distinct honor and privilege to be here today as we gather to celebrate the start of the 2019-20 academic year at East Tennessee State University. We gather together during what is the most exciting season in the academic year; the fall brings a sense of anticipation and renewal; the fall holds the promise of dreams to be realized, new relationships, journeys, and new opportunities. The fall is simply a magical time for this campus, our students, and the region as a whole.

I want to take a moment to extend a special welcome to the more than 90 new faculty members who are joining our family this fall. We are delighted that you have chosen ETSU as your new academic home. I look forward to meeting each of you and to learning more about your background and your journey to ETSU.

In addition to welcoming our new faculty to ETSU, I would like to take a moment to recognize four individuals who, during the past academic year, were named as Deans of their respective colleges or units. Here with us today are:

- **Dr. Bill Block**, who is the dean of the Quillen College of Medicine and the first alumnus to serve in that capacity;
- **David Atkins**, who became Dean of Sherrod Library at the beginning of January;
- **Dr. Chris Keller**, our new Dean of the Honors College; and,
- **Dr. Janna Scarborough**, who is serving as the Interim Dean of the Clemmer College.

Another individual who needs no introduction but who is serving in a new capacity this fall is Dr. Wilsie Bishop. Dr. Bishop has served in a number of progressively responsible positions at the University, most recently as our Vice President for Health Affairs. This past spring, Dr. Bishop assumed the

role of Senior Vice President for Academics and provides leadership for all of our 11 colleges and schools.

Today's convocation is the first time in more than two decades that Dr. Bert Bach did not stand at this podium to welcome our faculty back to campus. Next to Commencement, the Faculty Convocation was one of his most cherished events. As you know, Dr. Bach has announced his plans to retire after more than 24 years of leadership as our Provost. Dr. Bach is a legend in Tennessee higher education, having served for 43 years in a variety of roles at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, the Tennessee Board of Regents, and as the interim president here at ETSU.

(to Dr. Bach): Dr. Bach, I join the faculty here today, our entire staff and student body, and the thousands and thousands of others whose lives you have influenced through the years in saying thank you. Thank you for all you have done for ETSU, and thank you for all you have done to advance higher education across the state.

Dr. Bach's departure, as well as the recent retirements of other members of our senior administration, provided an opportunity for us to conduct a review of our organizational structure. Through this on-going process, a number of administrative functions have been realigned. To date, these changes include the creation of a new Compliance Office, which is part of our University Counsel office and provides oversight for our work with Title IX, Title VII, and other civil rights matters. In an effort to enhance our strategic growth and student success initiatives, our Admissions and Scholarship Offices were integrated with the Division of Student Life and Enrollment, thereby streamlining services and operations, allowing us to better serve the needs of our students from the point of application to career placement.

For several years, we have had conversations regarding our Office of Equity and Inclusion and the critical need to expand the scope, services, and role of the office. While the responsibility for ensuring that our goals for diversity and

inclusion are being reached ultimately rests with me as president, this work cannot be the responsibility of just one person or one office. One year ago, those efforts were being championed by Dr. Angela Lewis who, sadly, passed away this past January. I would like to thank and acknowledge Dr. Keith Johnson for the outstanding leadership that he has provided in an interim capacity. I look forward to working with him in an expanded capacity as we deepen our commitment to equity and inclusion in the coming academic year.

In addition to this work, we are exploring opportunities to strengthen and enhance our advising and research operations, and later this fall we will begin examining the alignment of our academic programs, colleges, and curriculum. Dr. Bishop will share additional details regarding these efforts during her comments later in the program. I must stress that this entire process is aligned with our charge from the Board of Trustees to ensure that we are positioned to meet the objectives outlined in our strategic plan.

Although the 2019-20 semester does not officially begin until Monday, there are many areas across campus where the fall semester is already underway. Last month, 72 first-year students at the Quillen College of Medicine began their journey to becoming physicians. It should be noted that more than 2,300 prospective medical students applied to be part of that class. The new academic year has also begun at the Gatton College of Pharmacy. Seventy-nine new students comprising the Class of 2023 received their white coats last Friday, and, as of today they will have completed their first week of studies.

By next Monday morning, over 14,500 students will have returned to campus for the start of the academic year. While we will not have our final enrollment numbers for another few weeks, I anticipate that our enrollment will be within our budget confidence intervals. Although our overall numbers are holding steady, several programs across campus are experiencing significant growth.

For example, we will have more than 320 high school students participating in our Buc Start dual-enrollment program. Two years ago, that number was less than 180. Last year was a record year in enrollment for the School of Graduate Studies, and this fall we anticipate surpassing that number. Our College of Nursing is also preparing for record-enrollment this fall. I want to commend Dr. Wendy Nehring and her faculty for their leadership in expanding the LPN to BSN completion program, which is now being offered in seven locations across the state, with at least two more sites to be added during the upcoming year, including a site at Vanderbilt University.

We are also seeing growth at the programmatic level. Three years ago during convocation, I announced that our Media and Communication department was launching a new graduate program in Brand and Media Strategy. This program began with 24 students and enrollment has continued to climb.

The acquisition of this building, which took place this past year, will provide much-needed academic and classroom space

for our Department of Computing. You can read more about plans for the Millennium Center as well as the Department of Computing's new cybersecurity concentration in our 2018-19 annual report, *Moving Mountains*, which you received a copy of as you entered the room today.

As you peruse the annual report, you will see that we truly moved mountains over the past year. For example

- We conferred a record 3,509 degrees;
- Our fall-to-fall retention rate was 73.1 percent, which represents an increase of four percent over the past five years;
- Our graduation rate was 41 percent, and, this fall, Dr. Mike Hoff anticipates that number will be 50 percent, which is the highest in the history of the university.
- More than 3,800 students were named to the Dean's List last fall;
- The average GPA of our entering freshman class was 3.5;

- Over \$47 million in extramural funding was awarded to our faculty and staff;
- We launched ETSU Health, thereby positioning our clinical operations to become the practice of choice for the citizens of our region;
- Our ETSU Health clinical sites reported over 273,000 patient encounters. This includes over \$2 million in uncompensated care provided by our staff at the Johnson City Community Health Center;
- Over 25,000 guests attended an arts event hosted by ETSU;
- Our student organizations contributed over 130,000 community service hours and raised more than \$290,000 for charities;
- We held our first Dula Day of Service in memory of Dr. Chris Dula and more than 200 students, faculty, staff, and community members contributed 600 hours of service;

- We also launched our capital campaign, The Campaign for ETSU, in which more than \$75 million has already been raised; and
- Our annual financial and compliance audit of ETSU by the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury was completed with no findings.

All was made possible because of you. Our faculty are the heart of the University, and your steadfast dedication and commitment to our teaching, research, and service missions allowed us to truly move mountains during the past academic year.

Last year, I joked to our new faculty that, yes, their new academic home was in fact a college campus and not one massive construction zone. To our 90+ new faculty members, you have joined ETSU during an unprecedented era of facilities expansion. During the upcoming year, two long-awaited projects will come to fruition. This spring, the D.P. Culp University Center will reopen its doors, and the more than 30-

year dream of the Martin Center for the Arts will become a reality.

However, I do not believe our “under construction” signs will be going away for too long. We are moving through the final phases of the design and planning process for the \$23 million renovation of Lamb Hall, which houses our Colleges of Public Health and Clinical and Rehabilitative Health Sciences. Also, in the coming months we will learn more about the potential funding for our proposed \$71 million Humanities building that will provide a new home for many of our liberal arts programs.

While we are proud of these new facilities, we should be equally proud of the investments that we have made in our employees. For seven out of the past eight years, we have provided salary enhancements for our faculty and staff. This year, our Board of Trustees approved a 2 percent salary increase for all employees. Furthermore, the Board authorized an increase in the stipends for graduate assistants of \$500, which

is the third consecutive year of such increases. Finally, we have raised our minimum entry salary for hourly employees, and many of our colleges are offering raises to adjunct faculty. These actions embody our strategic planning commitment to enhance faculty and staff salaries. During a period in which many states are retracting, and some have declared financial exigency, we are investing in our people, growing academic programs, and building new buildings.

We have a wonderful story to tell, and I need your help in telling that story. For several years, I have felt that we are the best kept secret in Tennessee higher education, and I hope that you share my desire to shine a bright light on ETSU and tell our story. There are multiple colors on our state's higher education pallet, and we all know that the best and brightest colors on that pallet are Blue and Gold.

Throughout our annual report, *Moving Mountains*, there is a recurring theme: a theme of pride, hard work, dedication, a commitment to service, and a willingness to meet big

challenges head on. This theme is embedded in the video from Marty Fitzgerald and has defined this institution since our founding in 1911.

In the early 1900s, the big challenge was to educate students from the rural regions of Tennessee, and from this challenge emerged the normal schools that would prepare a new generation of teachers, a challenge that led to the creation of East Tennessee State University. Later, the challenge of not having enough primary care physicians or pharmacists led to the creation of the Quillen College of Medicine and the Gatton College of Pharmacy.

In the late 1980s, the challenge was to find innovative ways to train health care professionals to practice in rural areas. A team of faculty at ETSU conceived an idea to establish a program where medical, nursing, and public health students would work together as a team in a local rural community and partner with the residents to develop strategies for addressing the region's population health challenges. This program was

funded through a \$6 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation. Through this initiative and others that followed, ETSU has earned distinction a national leader in rural health care education.

This distinction and recognition provided the foundation for a new challenge, a challenge to research and find solutions for many of the critical public health issues facing the Appalachian Highlands. Earlier this summer, Governor Bill Lee and Alan Levine joined me in announcing the largest gift in the history of ETSU, a gift by Ballad Health that will create the Center for Rural Health Research, a center whose faculty will research and assess solutions to address many of the challenges posed by inter-generational poverty.

Nearly 30 years ago, our faculty in the College of Nursing recognized the challenges facing the city's growing homeless population, most of whom had limited or no access to health care services. The idea came to create a health clinic in the downtown area where our nursing faculty and students could

provide care to this vulnerable, underserved population. That idea led to the establishment of the Johnson City Day Center nearly 30 years ago, an idea that has grown into a beautiful new building that provides healthcare safety net services to those whom, without ETSU, would not have access to healthcare.

As previously referenced, the start of any new academic year brings new relationships, new journeys, new ideas, and new challenges. I have shared examples of big ideas and big challenges from our institutional history as a prelude to a theme that I hope will undergird our work throughout the upcoming academic year.

I firmly believe that we are the land-grant institution for Central Appalachia, but I also believe that we struggle to quantify the meaning of that phrase. Each of us can talk about our individual teaching, research, and service, but how do we bring those individual stories together to tell the powerful story of the mission impact of our university? That question, and the challenge entailed therein, is something that I hope we can

explore, study, and assess throughout the coming academic year. If we are successful, we will have a powerful story to tell about the mission, activities, research, and the distinctive importance of the ETSU experience. In an era in which Americans are openly questioning the role of the academe in society, it is incumbent upon us to rise to the challenge to tell our story and to collectively champion the mission of this great institution.

In closing, as we begin this new academic year, I want to thank each of you for all you do for our great University and for all you do to make a difference in the lives of the people of the Appalachian Highlands. Not only are you guiding students, you are improving our communities.

Godspeed and Go Bucs!