

2015 Staff Convocation

Tuesday, September 29, 2015

Thank you, and good afternoon. I would like to begin by thanking Josh Whitlock and the other members of the Staff Senate for the invitation to be here and for all they do to support and empower the staff members of East Tennessee State University.

I must admit that it is hard to believe that it is almost October. It seems like just yesterday that we were starting the semester and welcoming our students back to campus. While I love the summer weather, I am looking forward to the autumn colors that adorn our campus.

So much of the enthusiasm that surrounds the beginning of the fall semester is driven by the anticipation of the year ahead. While our focus is on the future, I would like to take a few moments to reflect upon our accomplishments over the past year.

Did you know that over 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.

Though my State of the University address will occur on October 2, at 12:30 p.m. here in the Culp Auditorium, I would like to give you an early glimpse of some of the good news that I will provide to the full campus that afternoon.

Today, I am pleased to report that we finished the 2014-15 year with a balanced budget, and that we were able to put funds back into institutional reserves. Even though we face budget uncertainties, we are finding ways to invest in our faculty and staff. As I announced two weeks ago, 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 is strong. While the number of Tennesseans attending ETSU has declined because of a variety of external public policy initiatives, we experienced growth in out-of-state students, particularly those who were eligible for the George L. Carter scholarships. We also experienced pronounced growth in our graduate programs, which is a reflection of the quality of those programs. While I will provide a complete update on budgets and enrollment during my address to the campus on Friday, I thank you for allowing me to share some “advance” news with you this afternoon.

From the very first day our doors opened, we have been an institution focused upon excellence in the classroom and on the success of our students. Throughout our history books are stories about ETSU staff members who left a legacy for those who followed – a legacy defined by a commitment to serving this campus, our students and the region as a whole. It is my honor to share some of their stories with you this afternoon.

You have heard me say many times that this is one of the most beautiful college campuses in the South. I can make that statement because of the amazing and talented members of our grounds and

facility staff who work tirelessly every day to care for this campus. For years, our physical plant was led by Jim Seehorn, who served as director before retiring in 1999. Mr. Seehorn was on-call literally every day and night. He was known for his straight talk and natural wisdom. As you know, the road that extends along the backside of campus is named in his honor and his legacy of excellence is carried forward today by Bill Rasnick and his staff.

Across the facilities staff are people who dedicate their careers to taking care of our campus – people like Gary Bond, who has been part of the ETSU family since 1979. Gary comes to work while many of us are still asleep, traveling across campus and removing any trash so the grounds are clear by the time students and employees arrive on campus. Gary, thank you for all that you do for ETSU.

This past weekend was Homecoming and during the weekend's festivities I heard many stories from our alumni about Joan Dressel, who is remembered for her "can-do" attitude. She heeded the call to serve anywhere on campus. Ms. Dressel aided students when they first matriculated, serving for many years as housing director, and she later became our placement director and aided students as they prepared to leave for the job market. Many of the alumni that I spoke with over the weekend credited Joan with getting them their first job.

Another person remembered for her "can-do" attitude is Dr. Janice Shelton. I also heard her name with frequency over the past weekend for she was one of the most successful athletic directors in ETSU's history. A former women's basketball coach, she was highly respected in NCAA circles. Dr. Shelton is remembered for always being an encourager and always seeing the potential in people.

Today, when I have questions about budgets, I go down to Dr. David Collins' office. In decades past, that person would have been the late Harold Johnson, who retired as Bursar in 1988 after 32 years of service. Sadly, Mr. Johnson passed away on Sept. 20. Even though he spent his days dealing with bills and payments, Mr. Johnson is remembered as always having his smile and friendly demeanor. In addition to his tenure at ETSU, he was a member of the Washington County Board of Education for 22 years. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Johnson family during this difficult time.

Every year, as we welcome our new faculty and staff, we also say goodbye to others as they move into retirement and celebrate the new journeys that are ahead. Like Harold Johnson and Joan

Dressel, like Jim Seehorn and Janice Shelton, they too leave a legacy characterized by a profound commitment to serving this institution and our students.

A few weeks ago, we said goodbye to Tony Warner, who retired after 30 years of service. Tony and his staff made sure that the thousands of events that took place here within the University Center every year went smoothly. Tony helped launch our late-night pancake breakfast, which has become a beloved tradition. His legacy will be felt for years to come for he played a key role in the decision to renovate the Culp Center, with the goal of making the facility a true hub for student life.

In January, we will also say goodbye to Margaret Miller, who will retire from her position as Director of Financial Aid. Margaret has given 32 years to the students of ETSU through her service in our financial aid office, including 27 years as a director. During her tenure, the world of financial aid has changed dramatically – some things have gotten easier, while others have gotten wrapped up in red tape. Margaret, thank you for all you have done to help our students and parents navigate the financial aid waters through the years. It has been an honor to work with you.

In closing, I want to share one last story about another former staff member. Carson Gentry worked for ETSU for 25 years as our inventory control manager. Prior to joining the university staff, he was a member of the U.S. Army. He enlisted in the Army at the age of 17 as a Field Artilleryman and was stationed in Korea.

In 1950, just two weeks before he was scheduled to return home, North Korea invaded South Korea, and Sergeant Gentry's stay was extended. His unit fought in the battle of the Chosin Reservoir, which is described by some historians as the most savage battle of modern warfare. During that battle, Sergeant Gentry was wounded multiple times, and he was captured by the Chinese Red Army before he could be evacuated. He spent 33 months as a Prisoner of War before his release and return to the United States. After the Korean conflict had ended, he spent 18 more years in the Army before taking an assignment at ETSU as an ROTC instructor. Sergeant Gentry received a purple heart with an oak leaf cluster for his service to our nation.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to participate in a ceremony honoring our former prisoners of war, as part of an exhibit at the Reece Museum. We had planned to recognize Mr. Gentry that evening, but sadly, he passed away the day before that event.

What an honor it was for ETSU to have Carson Gentry as part of this community for a quarter-century. His legacy is one of great inspiration and earned respect. I share his story as an example of the caliber of individuals who have called this institution home for the past 104 years.

I could stand here all day sharing stories about the amazing men and women who comprise the ETSU family. The work you do each day, and your dedication and service to the people of East Tennessee are what make this such a great place. We are an institution that makes dreams happen. We transform lives. We are passionate about our students and our mission. That passion and ETSU Pride are part of our DNA and cannot be subcontracted to third parties. Thank you for all that you do each day when you walk onto our campus to help our students realize their dreams and thank you for the pride that you take in our great university.

Godspeed, and Go Bucs!