

Provost Report to Faculty Senate February 1, 2021

Start of Spring Term

I'd like to take a moment to welcome back all of the faculty to what I hope is the last semester under our severe covid restrictions. As we continue to learn from our experiences, it has become increasingly evident how, despite our best efforts and intentions, a fair segment of our student population continues to struggle. As you go forward throughout the term, please continue your efforts to encourage and support your students, provide multiple and timely feedback, and participate in 4-week and mid-term progress reporting, particularly in our 100- and 200-level classes where our student populations appear to be the most vulnerable.

BookSmart Program

Over the Winter break, ECU announced the start of the BookSmart program that will provide the use of textbooks at no cost to undergraduate students beginning in Fall 2021. This initiative aligns with the work of the Faculty Senate during the past few years that have focused on reducing the costs of textbooks as many of our students struggle with this. The academic success of our students depends, to at least some extent, on their ability to have access to course materials as soon as possible and we all know of students who have put off textbook purchase or decided to forgo them all together.

At its core, this is a textbook rental agreement but where the rental cost is absorbed by the University rather than the student. I appreciate the collaboration between ECU and Barnes & Noble that has made this program possible. But the long-term success of the program will depend on the continuing efforts of the faculty to minimize textbook costs for our students. In particular, the collaboration between the ECU Libraries and the faculty on developing free textbooks, the adoption of open-source textbooks where appropriate, and the continued focus on longer-term adoptions and cost consciousness during the selection process will be critical for this program to be sustainable. I deeply appreciate the contributions of the faculty in reducing textbook costs and hope

that efforts in these areas continue to move forward as we launch this program in the Fall.

Move to ASUN Athletic Conference

Last Friday, ECU announced that it will be leaving the OVC Athletic Conference and moving to the ASUN Conference beginning July 1, 2021. Although I anticipate there may be questions about this change, I wanted to take this opportunity to explain why I supported this proposal. For me the two most important factors were no net additional costs and the opportunities that this presented in terms of student recruitment. To the first point, remaining in the FCS Football Subdivision will not require the substantial investments that were a part of previous discussions. While there may be additional costs associated with travel, these should be more than offset by additional revenues that will be captured from athletic events in both football and basketball. But, by far, the most influential factor was that the conference realignment presents significant opportunities for ECU to establish a presence for student recruitment in larger markets than currently offered through the OVC. These include major metropolitan areas of Atlanta, Jacksonville, and Louisville. Recent initiatives such as the establishment of our Smart Rate have positioned us to be more effective in recruiting out of state students from regions of the country where they are more likely to attend ECU due to our greater alumni presence in these areas. As the vitality of ECU is going to depend on our ability to grow our enrollments, I believe the opportunities presented by this move are going to put us in a stronger position moving forward.

Fall 2021 Enrollment/Class Scheduling

Although Fall 21 seems a long way off, we need to be mindful of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. As of this meeting, we are seeing less than anticipated numbers of applications and admissions for the Fall 21 term. Perhaps this is not surprising given the uncertainty faced by high-school seniors and their parents along with the fact that many of our direct recruitment efforts with high schools has been hampered by our inability to visit those schools and meet with their students during the pandemic.

There is reason for optimism, however. In spite of the difficulties with the vaccine roll-out, it appears highly likely that our faculty and staff will be able to receive their vaccinations well in advance of the Fall semester. As we cautiously plan for fall, we are anticipating that we will be able to move toward a more “normal” class scheduling pattern and make every effort to provide the true college experience that many of our students are missing. In light of this, I would encourage all of you to take advantage of opportunities to receive the vaccine as it becomes more broadly available.

Finally, please do not underestimate your impact on student recruitment. While I fully understand the additional strains on faculty during the pandemic, students respond to faculty. The examples that you set and the experiences that you provide to our students are important.

I appreciate the work that all of you do in providing an exceptional learning experience for our students.

Jerry