

Remarks to the ECU Board of Trustees

John Stiller, Chair of the Faculty

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In my recent remarks to this body, I've talked about several broad initiatives underway to improve quality, efficiency, reporting and assessment of faculty activities. Today I want to highlight just a few of those activities that provide just a taste of the important scholarship underway by ECU faculty and its impact on our region.

I'm sure most or all of you have heard about precision medicine, or personalized healthcare, which aims to optimize treatments for individual patients based on genetic, physiological and environmental factors. The ECU-Vidant collaborative is uniquely situated to develop, implement, test and assess personalized healthcare, particularly for populations outside large metropolitan areas. To be effective, however, such targeted approaches require knowledge of both the individual and population level characteristics.

Dr Keith Keene is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Biology, and affiliated with ECU's Center for Health Disparities. Dr. Keene's research is defining the genetic bases for susceptibility of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases in diverse populations in Eastern North Carolina. His work provides just the kind of information needed for successful targeted precision medicine in our region. His results also have broader national implications for personalized medicine, one of the reasons Dr. Keene received an American Heart Association Career Development Award for over \$300,000. I learned only yesterday that, along with a collaborator, also in the Biology Department, he has just been awarded a grant for over \$400K from the National Institutes for Health to extend his research on stroke and train students in genomic analyses of diseases.

I should also mention that Keith is a native of eastern North Carolina; he was born in Ahoskie and grew up in Woodland, and most of his family and closest friends

remain in the area. Keith's contributions in understanding health disparities and expanding personalized medicine really are deeply personal and from the heart.

At this time of year, as mosquito populations are in decline, it is easy to put these summertime pests out of one's mind. Fortunately for our state and region, Dr. Stephanie Richards, Assistant Professor in the College of Health and Human Performance, takes no such break from researching these disease-spreading insects.

Dr. Richards and her students are collaborating with researchers at Western Carolina and North Carolina State Universities, and with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services in a "Zika Taskforce." They work with counties and local military installations to survey mosquitos across North Carolina, and identify populations where there are potential vectors of the Zika virus. To date, there are no known cases of Zika contracted directly from a mosquito in our state...all cases were contracted during travel. This is because the tropical mosquito species that can transmit the virus to humans is rare in NC; however, we are unlikely to remain so lucky...these mosquitos continue to creep northward as our climate warms. Moreover, our common local mosquito species is easily infected by the Zika, but so far cannot transmit the virus to human host. I say "so far" because, as an evolutionary biologist I know just how quickly barriers to disease transmission can break down. Dr. Richards' work is invaluable for understanding the increasing danger Zika to our region, not to mention the many other mosquito-borne diseases already here.

Dr. Richards also is leading several statewide studies funded by both the Pesticide Environmental Trust Fund and Bayer Crop Science to examine insecticide resistance in mosquito populations. Her research provides important information on the most effective mechanisms for use by mosquito control agencies and homeowners.

I'll begin my third highlight with a native American proverb; it says *"Tell me the facts and I'll learn. Tell me the truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever."* The implication for us is that the impact of the great scholarship carried out by our faculty and students has only as much impact as is conferred by our ability

to convey it effectively. This is a bit of a conundrum since most people are not predisposed to effective public presentation. As Jerry Seinfeld put it, “According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.”

Pamela Hopkins, a Teaching Assistant Instructor in the College of Fine Arts and Communication, is helping our faculty and students overcome this obstacle through an ECU Speech Communications Center.

The Center is housed in a former radio studio in the School of Communication, where researchers and instructors can practice speaking in front of a small group and receive confidential feedback. Dr. Hopkins and three graduate students offer one-on-one consultations as well as group workshops to help with researching, writing, organizing and delivering effective speeches and presentations, and on how to work effectively in a group, how to perform well in a job interview, and how to speak in a more professional manner.

Over the last several years, well over a thousand ECU Faculty, students and staff have taken advantage the resources Dr. Hopkins offers, and the center continues to attract a larger clientele as its reputation spreads. Among the most interesting aspects of this work is the number of international faculty and students that have benefited the resources Dr. Hopkins provides. Her center is an invaluable asset for achieving Chancellor Staton’s strategic goal of greatly internationalizing the university.

As you might imagine, I could go on all day with interesting faculty highlights, but you have a full agenda. Before ending, though, I want to point out that all three of these outstanding faculty members are assistant professors or instructors. Their contributions speak to the exceptional quality of young faculty we have been able to recruit, and emphasize the importance of finding ways to reward and retain such outstanding talent. I’ll end on that note I’m happy to take any questions.