

Board of Trustees Remarks
Mark W. Sprague, Chair of the Faculty
September 21, 2012

I bring greetings from the faculty! This is an exciting time at ECU. The students and faculty have returned from their summers, and campus is alive with activity. The semester is off to a great start. I would like to take this opportunity to share a little about just what faculty members do every day. People outside the university often have a misperception that faculty members teach a few classes and take the rest of the week off, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

To illustrate what a typical faculty member does, I brought a friend of mine from the physics department, Prof. John Kenney. Prof. Kenney received his Ph.D. from SUNY Stony Brook. Afterward he worked at the University of London, the University of Aarhus in Denmark, and the European Molecular Biology Lab in Heidelberg, Germany before coming to ECU in 2002. Prof. Kenney is an associate professor in Department of Physics and also an adjunct faculty member in the Departments of Biology and Chemistry. His research is fascinating: he uses circular dichroism spectroscopy to study protein structure, particularly the structure of the proteins in spider silk. What does that mean? He bounces light waves off of proteins and uses changes in the polarization of the light to learn about the structure of the proteins. I could go on and on about what he and his colleagues have learned about how spiders can change the structure of the proteins in their silk as they spin it and the applications of their work in areas as diverse as mad cow disease and production of advanced fibers, but this is not a science lecture.

So what does a typical day look like for a faculty member like Prof. Kenney? He prepares and gives lectures for his classes. Right now he is teaching the introductory calculus-based physics courses for physics, chemistry, and biochemistry majors. He finds time to read the research literature, hold office hours for his students, meet with colleagues to discuss research, and work in his research lab.

Since coming to ECU, Prof. Kenney has published over 20 papers in collaboration with his ECU colleagues and his students. He won the Sigma Xi Helms Award for a paper that was the first to describe spider silk as an amyloid similar in structure to mad cow disease.

One important thing that makes a university like ECU so different than a community college or a high school is that the faculty members are scholars who create knowledge or produce creative works. We do not just teach. We advance our disciplines. As a result, our students get the opportunity to learn about something like physics from someone who really does it. For example, when Prof. Kenney teaches his students about energy, he shows them examples of the energy in protein shapes from measurements he made.

In his lab, Prof. Kenney works with a mix of students, graduate and undergraduate, from various majors. His students have regular lab meetings to discuss their work, and Prof. Kenney organizes a weekly spectroscopy club meeting where students and faculty can discuss the latest findings and present their work. Prof. Kenney's Ph.D. student Julie DiNitto, who graduated last May, won second place in a poster competition at the CD2011 meeting in Oxford, England. Prof. Kenney published three research papers with Julie. You can see that we teach our students even when we do our research.

In addition to teaching and research, faculty members are responsible for other academic matters such as developing and evaluating programs, approving new courses, and serving on tenure and promotion committees. Prof. Kenney serves on the physics department Undergraduate Committee, the Honors College Committee, and the Educational Policies and Planning Committee. The two of us have a physics tenure committee meeting this afternoon.

Prof. Kenney is an outstanding example of the dedicated faculty we have at ECU, and we have others like him throughout the university. The faculty is the soul of a university. If you come back to ECU in ten years, all of the students will be different, but most of the faculty here today will still be around. Faculty members like Prof. Kenney are so important to the very nature of the university. I want you to appreciate that so much of what we do is outside the classroom, whether it is in the research lab, the art studio, or in the committee room. The faculty serve ECU, our students, our community, and our professions every day, inside and outside of the classroom.