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Downs Joins East Carolina University as Dean of the Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences

GREENVILLE, N.C. (July 11, 2014) — Dr. William M. Downs joined East Carolina University July 1, 2014, as the new Dean of the Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences and as a professor of political science.

“I am both honored and excited to lead Harriot College as Dean. As I continue to learn more about Arts and Sciences at ECU, I gain even greater appreciation for the rich tradition of excellence that we have across a diverse range of disciplines and interdisciplinary programs,” said Downs. “I also sense a real appetite for building a new culture of continuous improvement, and I hope we can employ that positive energy in meaningful ways moving forward. Because Arts and Sciences are so indispensable to the University’s overall mission – and because our faculty are so committed to that mission – I cannot help but feel optimistic about the impact we can make.”

When outlining his goals, Downs said he really has a “full plate,” and he touched on the following four as top priorities for the college.

“1) We want to do a much better job showcasing the achievements of our faculty and staff, underscoring how work done in the field, in the laboratory and in the classroom is generating new knowledge and transforming lives.
2) We want to seek out new opportunities for collaborative research, connecting scholars with shared interests from across our college and across the university to more aggressively capitalize on external funding.
3) In our undergraduate and graduate programs, we want to leverage the unique qualities of an East Carolina education to ensure that students graduate with the benefit of one or more ‘signature experiences’ in their chosen discipline.
4) We also want to prioritize our relationships with alumni and with communities in the region. Renewing contacts and committing to long-term partnerships will be essential to sustain Harriot College’s role as a vital hub for scholarship, leadership and service.”

Downs’ most recent administrative appointment was as Area Dean for Social and Behavioral Sciences in the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgia State University, where he was a member of the faculty for 17 years. Prior to his service in the Dean’s Office at GSU, Downs served as Chair and Director of Graduate Studies of the Department of Political Science. Also while at GSU, Downs was founder and co-director of the interdisciplinary Center for Human Rights and Democracy and faculty coordinator for semester-long study abroad programs in Strasbourg, France, and Nottingham, England. For more than a decade, Downs coordinated the University’s Certificate Program in European Union Studies, combining traditional classroom learning with distance education and immersion experiences in Europe.
Among his research and teaching interests, Downs’ expertise lies at the intersection of comparative politics and international relations. His work addresses four interconnected themes: 1) political extremism and the politics of rejection, 2) elections and electoral behavior, 3) decentralization, regionalism, and the politics of place and 4) legislative institutions. His most recent book, *Political Extremism in Democracies: Combating Intolerance*, provides cross-national comparison and analysis of responses to so-called “pariah parties” as they have risen to relevance across a range of contemporary political systems.

“Teaching remains a great passion for me, and I look forward to engaging ECU students in the classroom and through mentoring of individual projects in my home discipline of political science,” said Downs. “I offer courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels on political parties, legislative institutions, negotiation and bargaining, and political extremism.”

Downs has been a research fellow at Harvard University’s Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, a graduate research associate working on democratization movements at the Carter Center’s African Governance Program and a Fulbright dissertation researcher in Belgium. His research in political science has led to funded partnerships with faculty at Queens University, Belfast (Northern Ireland), the University of Strasbourg (France), and the University of Pretoria (South Africa).

A Raleigh native, Downs earned his BA in political science (with a minor in journalism) from North Carolina State University in 1988, and his MA (’90) and PhD (’94) degrees in political science from Emory University.

“I am a proud North Carolinian. My motivations as an educator and as an administrator were fundamentally shaped by growing up in North Carolina and by earning my undergraduate degree in this state,” said Downs. “As a college student, I had the opportunity to serve as a state government intern in Raleigh, which impressed upon me the value of a local perspective and gave me a lifelong appreciation for place and identity. I also had the opportunity to study abroad, which complemented my local perspective with a global one. My subsequent career has consistently emphasized connecting the local with the global. By taking the job at East Carolina, I have in some ways come home again. As I think about my new role as Dean, I am buoyed by the hope that our college can enrich students and our region’s communities by likewise connecting them to an ever globalized world.”

Downs is married to wife Kimberly Harwood Downs and has two children, Rachel and Bradley.

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