Five Questions With...

Jason Brinkley, PhD

Jason Brinkley, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Biostatistics and has an adjunct appointment in the Department of Public Health. He received his PhD in statistics from North Carolina State University in 2008 and worked at the Duke Center for Human Genetics and GlaxoSmithKline. Dr. Brinkley then joined the ECU faculty shortly after completing his PhD. Dr. Brinkley serves on numerous ECU committees and previously served as Chair of the University Research and Creativity Committee. He is also very active in his profession; serving as the North Carolina Chapter Representative for the American Statistical Association and recently serving on the National ASA’s Council of Chapters Governing Board Nominations Committee. Dr. Brinkley keeps busy as a statistical consultant on numerous projects and has worked as an external consultant for the NC Public Health Foundation, the University of Miami Institute for Human Genomics, and SAS Institute. In his research pursuits, he balances his research time between theoretical ways to assess the impact of medical interventions on public health and the best practices for using software to teach statistical methods.

1. What do you like best about working at ECU?

The people are the best part about working at ECU. The people at ECU are one of ECU’s best features. The sense of community and togetherness that is here is unlike anywhere else I have seen. I saw it as a student and I continue to see it as a faculty member.

2. What do you find most exciting about your research and its potential?

While I do have a few personal research endeavors here at ECU, mostly centered on the statistics of personalized medicine and the use of statistical software, I spend a large portion of my time working with other faculty members on their research. Those consultations and collaborations have seen a lot of interesting output. A famous statistician is often quoted as saying 'Statistics is the servant to all sciences' and I think you will find that especially true for biostatistics at ECU. I like playing in other people’s playgrounds and I am a sucker for interesting data. Doing good work and seeing the potential real impact in this region is what excites me. We have some great faculty members doing wonderful things in cancer, public health, veteran’s issues, aging, health disparities, and so many other areas. What I love about ECU is that many times the research is guided by and has a direct impact on the region.

3. What excites you about teaching?

I love to see the 'ah ha' moment in students. I love to see them take complicated data and provide an exceptionally compelling visual or table that really captures the story the data has to tell. I would rather they see their findings before they get some kind of analytic result that says what they have is a 'significant' finding.

4. What do you hope students take away from their experiences from working with you on your research?
Biostatistics doesn't have a degree program so there have been limited opportunities for students to work with me in methods. But I do work with a lot of different students on their own research. Some come to me with deep math-phobias. My goal there is to build the confidence in the students that they can do the analysis, that with the right tools and patience they can make sense of their data. I like it when they have confidence in their results.

5. What is your favorite teaching or research moment?

I had a student last year that needed a methodologist for her thesis. It was ambitious and she considered herself incapable of understanding the statistics and the software to do the analysis that would be needed. The data were some of the most complex I have seen for student level projects. She had gathered everything she could think to find and we found that the end-of-grade (EOG) pass rate was 3-4 points lower in middle grade students in schools that had a high percentage of teachers who disapproved of the leadership initiatives of their bosses. It was sort of a 'few teachers poisoning the well' argument. It is a great thesis by a student and a student who thought about stopping several times.