Roman Pawlak, PhD, RDN is an Associate Professor in the Department of Nutrition Science. He completed his PhD at the University of Southern Mississippi in Nutrition and Food Systems and then joined the ECU faculty in 2003. First, as a visiting assistant professor then in a full-time position in 2005. His research focus is in the area of vitamin B12 and vegetarianism and he has investigated vitamin B12 and vegetarian nutrition in different populations including individuals with diabetes and lactating women. Currently, Dr. Pawlak is collaborating with Dr. Cummings and Dr. Patil from BSOM on an Interdisciplinary Research Collaborative Award from ECU. Most recently, he was awarded funding from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Foundation. In his spare time, Dr. Pawlak travels the world exploring and learning about different cultures.

What do you like best about working at ECU?
ECU has a perfect balance between emphases on teaching, research and service. I love being in the classroom and interacting with students. I also love writing manuscripts. But just as much, if not more, I love to be engaged in community service activities. I had the opportunity to work with members of African American and Native American churches in eastern NC in faith-based nutrition intervention programs. I had the opportunity to lecture on nutrition in several countries outside of the US. All of these activities are consistent with ECU focus on service.

What do you find most exciting about your research and its potential?
Issues related to low vitamin B12/vitamin B12 deficiency may have profound impact on individuals’ well-being across the lifespan from a fetus in mothers’ womb to centenarians. Thus, the most exciting part of what I do has to do with the application of research findings for individuals in the community.

What excites you about teaching?
By far the most exciting part is to see the transformation of a student from the time he/she takes Nutrition Science class (which usually happens in the beginning of his/her undergraduate program) to taking Nutrition and Disease (upper level class) and/or Vegetarian Nutrition (graduate class). Seeing a young person with no nutritional background/knowledge become a professional who is able to write manuscripts, synthesize literature, make appropriate conclusions, etc. is invaluable.

What do you hope students take away from their experiences from working with you on your research?
I hope students will acquire skills and understand the process so they can apply what they learned to what they might get involved in their future.

What is your favorite teaching or research moment?
I took a “College teaching” class when I was a doctoral student. The one thing that I remember from that class was the idea that true success in teaching involves a change in behavior. A few semesters ago I had a non-traditional student who always had a big smile on her face when she entered the classroom. She used to sit in the first row. At the end of the semester I received an e-mail from her. She thanked me for a great semester and then, she wrote the following (I am quoting as I remember): “Ever since I remember, I was obese. And ever since I remember all of my family members were obese. Everyone always blamed it on our genes. Since the beginning of this semester I lost 38 lbs.” Then, she proceeded to tell me what lifestyle changes she made that resulted in such weight loss. She also shared with me how she had already begun sharing what she learned with her family members. She is one of a number of students I recall who over the years communicated to me how taking one of my courses resulted in some type of behavioral change. This is why I love my job.