Toyin Babatunde, PhD

Oyinlola (Toyin) Babatunde, PhD, MPH, RDN. Dr. Babatunde earned her PhD in Dietetics and Nutrition from Florida International University, and her MPH from the University of the West Indies, Jamaica. She joined the ECU faculty in 2010. Dr. Babatunde is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Nutrition Science. Her training and international experience brings a unique perspective to the Department of Nutrition Science, and influence her teaching and research work. Dr. Babatunde’s research focuses on improving health of underserved and vulnerable populations particularly minority and older adults, to assure healthy aging and reduce health disparities. She has established several collaborations and works with Dr. Stephanie Pitts, Dept. of Public Health on a USDA grant as a co-investigator, and with Drs. Kyle Summers and Keith Keene, both in the Dept. of Biology as a co-PI on a grant from Duke University, Triangle Center for Evolutionary Medicine (TriCEM). Currently, Dr. Babatunde is an Engagement & Outreach Scholars Academy Scholar working in partnership with a rural food pantry.

What do you like best about working at ECU?

A lot of great things! One of which is the people I work with and the opportunity to network with faculty from other disciplines. I chose to work at ECU to make an impact in the Eastern NC communities and be part of the transformation the university represents. I also enjoy interdisciplinary work and ECU gives me the opportunity to thrive in this area. I have established great relationships within the university and the community, some of which have developed into collaborative work.

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

My passion is to improve the lives of the underserved and promote equity to reduce health disparities, one of the national health goals. My research work with underserved population groups gives me joy as I connect with them to understand their challenges to adopting healthy lifestyles. This understanding helps with developing tailored interventions for positive behavior change, promote nutrition literacy, and overall wellness, while empowering these individuals to take charge of their health. This research stream aligns with ECU’s mission and is important for the regional transformation.

What excites you about teaching?

The university’s foundation domestic diversity course (Cultural foods) that I teach attracts undergraduates from every field which is fun. Seeing the change in a student’s world view from the time the semester starts to when it ends is very exciting to me. In the field of nutrition and dietetics as in other health profession we encounter people from other cultural and racial/ethnic backgrounds that are different from us, and embracing the diversity is key to reducing health disparities. I am always excited to hear my students sharing their experiences in class. In particular, when a student says at the end of
the semester “what other classes do you teach? I have enjoyed this class and will like to take another class with you.” Students often say “you force us to get out of our comfort zone” and I believe we all need this to better serve the diverse population. Each semester, I learn from my students as they develop cultural competency skills and share in class their different encounters with people from diverse cultural groups and backgrounds.

What do you hope students take away from their experiences from working with you on your research?

I hope students will acquire the knowledge, skills, and passion to motivate them to continue in research. Considering the diversity of the US population and Eastern NC, I sincerely hope the students that work with me will develop empathy and passion to work with the underserved in this region. Particularly a lifelong interest in providing nutrition services and/or conducting research to enhance the lives of older adults, a population group that is growing at an unprecedented rate, is much needed. My goal is for these students to develop a lifelong desire for research.

What is your favorite teaching or research moment?

I have been blessed with wonderful people who have invested in my life as teachers and research mentors to make me who I am today, and I am indebted to give back. One of my favorite moments is observing the excitement of undergraduate students when given the opportunity to gain research experience, and most importantly when they present their work at different forums. Another one is reading from past students how the knowledge gained from my classes are impacting their career.