

## Remarks to the Board of Trustees

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November 2018

Good morning, everyone. I am Jeff Popke, Chair of the Faculty, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you. I want to say a few words about the importance of shared governance. But before I do, I want to start by underscoring the essential role of our faculty in some of the successes that you have been hearing about at recent board meetings. You have heard, for example, that faculty are helping our students graduate at the highest rate in ECU's history, and are playing a key role in devising new strategies for growing our enrollments and increase student retention. Our faculty researchers are achieving unprecedented success in securing research grants, and have generated the highest level of research funding that ECU has ever seen. And some of you heard yesterday how faculty mentors are pairing our honors students with community partners to address pressing challenges here in Eastern North Carolina. So, I think it is clear, our faculty have been doing extraordinary work in our classrooms, our labs, in clinical settings, and in the communities that we serve.

But I also want to acknowledge this morning that we are experiencing a time of considerable change, and a bit of uncertainty, and I can tell you forthrightly that overall faculty morale at ECU is as low as I have seen it in my 20 years here. This much was indicated recently by a system-wide employee engagement survey, the results of which suggest that ECU faculty hold more negative opinions about our university than employees elsewhere in the UNC system, especially in areas related to trust, institutional mission, and communication.

In my view, many of the factors contributing to low faculty morale derive from beyond our campus, include deteriorating public attitudes toward higher education, relatively flat faculty salaries, and an increasingly activist state-legislature and Board of Governors. We can now add the uncertainty surrounding leadership change at the UNC System.

It is within this context of a somewhat unsettled external environment that I want to stress the vital importance of safeguarding ECU's longstanding tradition of shared governance.

Now, the concept of shared governance is admittedly a bit nebulous, and it turns out that it is a fairly recent idea in American higher education. For the first 200 years or so, American universities were top-down institutions controlled by powerful college presidents and boards of trustees, and faculty has little say in campus affairs.

Here's how one newspaper put it in 1881: "the trustee wishes very much that a college could be carried on entirely without without professors, and has a vague notion that by some sort of organizational improvement, this outcome might some day be achieved." (p. 29)

I hope I am safe in expressing my gratitude to our trustees for *not* having secret plans for a university without professors – although I can tell you that some of our faculty suspect that such a plan might exist in some quarters of our state legislature.

No, as we are aware, the faculty role in in the mission of American universities has only grown, and this is what led to increasing calls for a 'shared governance', essentially a partnership between college presidents, boards of trustees, and an increasingly important and engaged faculty.

Shared governance came to ECU in the 1960s under the leadership of President Leo Jenkins, and still today it provides the ideal model for ensuring that all campus constituencies play a meaningful role in university deliberations, decision-making and administration.

I want to close by noting that there is an important role to be played here by the Board of Trustees, and I recommend to you the recent 'Statement on Shared Governance', endorsed just last year by the Association of Governing Boards. That Statement represents a strong validation of shared governance principles and stresses the importance of trustees to its success. "A board's commitment to the value and practice of shared governance," the statement notes, "bears fruit for the institution in the form of mutual trust in challenging times, support for innovation, and shared commitment to goals for building a stronger future."

As we seek to weather our own challenging times, reaffirming our commitment to shared governance can help to build trust and combat low morale, galvanize a shared sense of institutional mission, and serve as an effective bulwark against unwarranted intrusion in our campus affairs – all things that will be especially important during a time of considerable system-level change.

On behalf of the faculty, I can assure you that we stand ready to work with our trustees, administration, and other campus constituencies to constructively and collaboratively address the challenges that we face, and to continue moving this great university forward.