

**2019 Fall Faculty Convocation**  
**Remarks from Jeff Popke, Chair of the Faculty**  
**View the full ceremony [here](#).**

Next on the Agenda are my own ‘Reflections on the Coming Year’. I’d like to orient my remarks around some of the challenges that we face, and some possible strategies and initiatives to address them. And to do so, I want to return to Bangladesh, a country that may hold lessons for coping with a challenging environment. As some of you will know, Bangladesh has become iconic as the country perhaps most at risk from climate change. Much of the country sits within the low-lying floodplains of the Ganges river delta, an area prone to floods and tropical cyclones. My recent visit centered on the rural, Southeast of the country, a landscape of simple homesteads surrounded by fish ponds, fruit trees, and a shimmering patchwork of emerald green rice paddies. This provides the setting for a research project focused on riverbank erosion, a common hazard caused when sudden flows of water from upstream glacial melt or monsoon rainfall cut dramatically into the banks of Bangladesh’s many rivers. Some rivers erode their banks by hundreds of meters each year, in the process swallowing up the land and the homes of scores of riverside residents.

So, yes, this is my allegory for the year ahead. Some will recall that last year’s metaphor was a catastrophic hurricane in the Caribbean, and now this year, it’s the specter of being so undermined by currents we cannot control that we risk plunging into the proverbial river. What can I say? These are tough times for geographers of climate change.

Actually, I will try to strike a hopeful tone. For, what I have learned from studying rural livelihoods, whether in the Caribbean or Bangladesh, is that households and communities are incredibly resourceful in the face of risk, and we might well take inspiration from their ability to make do when circumstances are less than ideal. And ‘less than ideal’ might seem a fair characterization of the current climate for higher education.

A short list of concerns nationwide might include the following: declining trends in student enrollment, combined with market disruption and increased competition, especially within the market for distance learning; declining public financial support, leading to escalating student debt, and a greater public skepticism about the value of higher education; and of course faculty salaries that remain flat, even as executive compensation continues to grow.

So, not unlike small farmers in Bangladesh, our success is going to depend upon our ability to contend with an environment that is changing quite rapidly. I’d like to draw here upon two key concepts from the climate change literature, those of adaptation and resilience, and I’ll offer a few thoughts about each in turn.



So, first adaptation. In its most basic sense, adaptation is about learning to adjust to a changing climate or new environmental conditions. For farmers in Bangladesh, this may mean adopting new household strategies, such as the planting of new kinds of crops or the diversification of household income sources.

Here at ECU, the two most consequential changes to our immediate environment have to do with enrollment declines and their impact on the short-term budget outlook. I won't add much to what the Chancellor has said already about this, except to suggest that our institutional responses to these challenges will be most effective if they occur in the context of meaningful shared governance. On the enrollment side, we will need the talents and the good ideas of our faculty as we work to shore up our traditional recruiting grounds, while also looking to expand into new student markets.

One area where we can be more strategic is in the development of new degree programs or the rebranding of existing ones. As we learn more about our enrollment dynamics, it will be up to faculty to devise educational programs that can respond creatively to contemporary labor market trends, and effectively tap into new student populations.

On the budget side, I have indicated to Chancellor Gerlach my willingness to engage the faculty in a dialogue about how best to set priorities during a time of scarce resources. One part of this conversation has to do with our research enterprise, and I am pleased to note that Vice-Chancellor Golden has initiated a discussion involving faculty leadership and faculty researchers to consider how we can most effectively leverage our recent successes in growing our extramural funding to enhance scholarly activity at ECU.

I would add a note here that adapting to a dynamic environment does not mean changing who we are or altering our core values. To stretch the metaphor perhaps a bit far, we are looking to increase yields and add some new crops into our rotation, but we need not abandon the farm, move to Dhaka, and take up driving a rickshaw. We at ECU continue to have a compelling story to tell about student success, public service and regional transformation. Our challenge is to tell that story in effective ways, and to build upon our existing skills and talents, and the ongoing commitments—to our students and to our region—that we already have in place.



So now, then, a word about resilience. And my message here is that we will be less resilient if we allow our bonds of community and mutual support to fray. Small-scale farmers in places like Bangladesh have long-standing traditions of mutual aid and cooperation. It is common, for example, that I help you bring in your harvest today, and then you return the favor next week. Research shows that maintaining such bonds—often discussed in terms of social capital—is essential to building resilient communities. What this means for ECU, I think, is that we need to attend to the well-being of all members of our university community.

In terms of the faculty, let me note two initiatives that we hope to launch this coming year. First, in part responding to an AAUP resolution in the Senate last Spring, we will be undertaking a multi-pronged effort this year to document and address the particular challenges and concerns of our fixed-term faculty members. We hope to explore issues related to salary, contract provisions, and opportunities for advancement.

It is my hope that this endeavor will be viewed as part of a broader commitment on the part of your leadership to ensure that the views and concerns of all of our faculty—regardless of your appointment or the school or college in which you work—are reflected in our campus-wide priorities and initiatives.

And second, the Faculty Officer team will be focusing on a set of interrelated issues around faculty recruitment, mentoring, and retention in the context of diversity and inclusion. It takes a concerted and collective effort to cultivate a welcoming environment, one in which – again – all of our faculty, and indeed our staff and students as well, can find a sense of belonging and purpose, and maximize their potential.

And here, let me say, that we must, as faculty, disavow—through our principles, actions, and pedagogy—contemporary expressions of racism, xenophobia, and white supremacy. And yes, this includes the shocking chant that rang out from our campus some weeks back, aided and abetted by the demagoguery and racial animus of the US President.

Let us reaffirm, in case it could be in question, that our community will not tolerate expressions of hatred in our midst, that we will work assiduously to provide an environment in which tolerance, decency, and respect are cardinal values.

And in that spirit, here is my message to prospective students and to their families, to a future cohort that just might include the next Ilhan Omar or Ayanna Pressley, or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Send her here. Send her to East Carolina University, and I pledge to you that our faculty, and our partners across this great institution, will deliver a world-class education and the skills and the high-impact experiences to leverage it for a lifetime of success. And we will do so within a community and an intellectual environment that is welcoming, vibrant, and inclusive.



And it is on that note, my fellow travelers, that we must conclude this year's field trip through rural Bangladesh and the tangled thickets of American higher education. I am aware that I have focused quite a bit on what seem to me to be some evident challenges. So, I should end by reiterating that I am in fact extremely optimistic about ECU's future. I am starting this fall my third decade as a member of the ECU faculty, and the institution that I see before me today is so much more vibrant, more engaged, more impactful than the one I joined 20 years ago. The Lion's share of the credit for that goes to you, our faculty, and the outstanding work that you do every day, in your classrooms, your labs, your studios and clinics. So, thank you for what you do. Working together, I have no doubt that we will be able to adapt to our fickle environment, and we will continue making a difference in the lives of our students, and to the people of North Carolina.

Thank you.