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2015 April 29 - Spring Gathering Address

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EAST TENNESSEE STATE
UNIVERSITY

Office of the President

Spring Gathering Address
Wednesday, April 29, 2015
2:30 p.m. – Amphitheatre

Good afternoon, and thank you for taking time out of your schedule to come together to celebrate the conclusion of the spring semester. While today is a time of celebration, events around us serve as a reminder of how fortunate we are at ETSU. Please join me in a moment of silence for the people of Nepal who are working through unconceivable issues in the aftermath of the recent earthquake that struck their nation.

Before I go any further, there is someone I would like to recognize. A year ago Doretha Benn was elected president of our SGA. *(pause)* And what a year it has been. If there is one thing I have learned, it is that if we both were scheduled to speak at an event, I always went first because she is a tough act to follow. Her larger-than-life personality, her willingness to voice her opinion, and her love for all things ETSU have made this a year that I will always remember with great fondness. Yesterday marked her last day as SGA president; today I would like to thank her for her hard work and dedication to our university. Doretha, please come forward. *(present flowers to her)*.

The closing of the spring semester is a time of celebration, for graduation is in just 10 days. And, it is a time for all of us to pause and celebrate our collective efforts to assist our students in achieving their dreams of a college degree.

In fact, that is part of what this week is all about. Faculty/Staff Appreciation Week is a time when we say thank you for all that you do on a daily basis to help us achieve our mission of regional stewardship. I have enjoyed randomly drawing the names of employees and surprising them this week with special gifts. I enjoyed watching the video in which our students said “thank you” for making a difference in their lives. I’ve also enjoyed reading the homepage profile stories of our faculty and staff. I read about Hank Williams, one of our lead custodial workers, whose Native American roots run deep.

I read about Dr. Lorianne Mitchell from our College of Business and Technology who talked about those who inspired her to become a teacher. Today, I read about Shelly Mangiacotti (MAN-GEE-UH-COT-EE), a staff member from our College of Nursing who helps keep the Dean’s office running each day. We will have a different faculty or staff member on the homepage tomorrow through Sunday, and I look forward to reading those stories as well.

I could spend all afternoon saying “thank you” to our faculty and staff. But as part of this week’s celebration, we invited students and alumni to share a few words of thanks to those members of the ETSU family who have made a difference in their lives. Let me share some of their comments with you.

To Dr. Caroline Abercrombie at our College of Medicine: “From teaching anatomy to tutoring students to prompting changes in the curriculum to heading multiple committees.... Dr. Abercrombie does so much for Quillen College students!! She always has a smile on her face and encouraging words to share.”

To Dr. Jesse Graves in the Department of Literature and Language: “Your mentoring during my tutorial and poetry class have helped me elevate my craft to a surprising level. You are so generous with your time and support. Your own talent is amazing. I truly think you are on your way to becoming one of the great poets of our time.”

To Jerdan Swingle in the School of Continuing Studies and Academic Outreach: “Being an adult student learner and coming back into college after 35 years was scary, however, Ms. Swingle made the process easy and exciting. She always builds her students up and helps with keeping us pumped up and excited about our graduation.”

These and many other comments are on display here today. I want to thank our INtopForm staff for coordinating this project. Please take some time to read what our students and alumni have written about you.

As much as this time of year is about celebrating, it is also a time of saying goodbye as our graduates embark on new journeys and destinations. We also say farewell – and thank you – to those faculty and staff members who will soon be retiring. I would like to highlight just a few of them.

For Charles Gunter from our Department of Geosciences, ETSU has been his home for over 50 years. He began teaching geography here in 1964 when we were under the leadership of President Burgin Dossett. He remembers the days when his exams were printed on a mimeograph machine; today, he uses a smart board and teaches courses online. Professor Gunter says the greatest joy of his job at ETSU has been seeing his students go on to do great things. Congratulations, Professor Gunter, on 50 amazing years at ETSU (*applause*).

Another faculty member who is retiring this spring is Dr. Peggy Cantrell. Dr. Cantrell joined the ETSU faculty in the early 1980s. In addition to being an outstanding teacher and a national expert on the topics of domestic violence and violence against women, she was one of the leaders in establishing our doctoral program in clinical psychology. Dr. Cantrell led the planning process, helped write the proposal, developed the curriculum, hired faculty, recruited students and served as the director of clinical training. Thanks to Dr. Cantrell, the future of this program is ever-bright.

We will also say goodbye to someone who has transformed nursing education at ETSU for the past 20-plus years. Dr. Joellen Edwards was the founding chair of what was then the Department

of Family and Community Nursing. She later became dean of the College of Nursing. During her tenure, Dr. Edwards led the effort to start a doctoral program in nursing and also was a driving force behind the Johnson City Downtown Clinic and the Mountain City clinic, both of which celebrate their 25th anniversaries this year. Today, thanks in part to Dr. Edwards, ETSU has one of the largest networks of nurse-managed clinics in the nation. Dr. Edwards...you have been a conduit for great change at this institution, and we wish you well in the journeys that are ahead.

Let's give all of our retirees a round of applause.

There are defining moments and elements in every academic year. 2014-15 was no different. Who would have known that February would be a banner month for snowfall? As much as our students enjoyed that "snow-cation," I realize that our absence from campus placed many classes behind schedule, especially those taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I appreciate all that you have done to ensure academic quality and integrity despite lost class time.

In my time left with you today, I want to update you on the progress surrounding several initiatives at the institution.

First, it is my pleasure to announce that the ETSU fine arts facility is finally a dream come true. In the coming weeks, we will purchase Lot 1, which as many of you know is located adjacent to the Millennium Centre. This is the site of the facility. The last time an academic building was constructed on this campus was in 2002 when Stanton-Gerber Hall was completed. As we solidify our design plans and continue to work through other details related to the project, we'll also be ramping-up our fundraising efforts. You'll be hearing more about this project in the near future.

Salary and equity enhancements for faculty and staff are and will continue to be the top priority as we forge ahead to the upcoming academic year. During two out of the past three years we have been able to provide salary enhancements, and we have submitted plans to TBR that will provide additional enhancements in 2015-16.

During the past year, we added 14 new staff members to our team of professional advisors. We are implementing aggressive and proactive approaches to improve advising at ETSU. These include direct interventions that allow us to assist at-risk students early in their academic career and get them on the right path to succeed academically. Our new advisors have been placed into our individual colleges, as well as Northeast State Community College.

Conversations took place through the 2014-15 academic year regarding strategic opportunities in research. This dialogue was led by Dr. Rob Pack and Dr. Bill Duncan, and a report detailing their preliminary recommendations was released to the campus last month. Many of you attended our open forums or submitted feedback to Dr. Pack over the past several weeks. I look forward to hearing your suggestions as we begin to review the implementation of their proposal.

On that same note, I also want to thank those of you who have been part of our collective effort to define a new budget process for ETSU. Dr. Larry Calhoun, Dr. Virginia Foley and Dr. Bert Bach and their committees have done an outstanding job in exploring the challenges and opportunities surrounding the way we build budgets and establish budget priorities at ETSU. Their work remains ongoing, but I am confident in the progress that has been made to date.

Throughout the summer we will be hearing more about the potential merger of Mountain States Health Alliance and Wellmont Health Systems and what this means for ETSU. There are certainly opportunities on the table for us, but the specific details remain fluid. I will keep you updated as these conversations evolve.

As I noted earlier, a new arts center is on its way to our campus, but that is not the only project that will be initiated in the upcoming academic year. In fact, in a compressed five-year window, we will experience what may be the largest amount of projects and dollars spent on capital in the history of our university. And given the changing landscape of higher education, that is a powerful place to be in.

For too long, many of our faculty have been educating our students in substandard settings, and that is getting ready to change. Over the next five years, we will see several construction and renovation projects come to fruition that will provide new and improved instructional space on our campus. None of these are buildings for the sake of buildings – they represent a medium through which our faculty will be able to share their talents, creativity and passion with the next generation of ETSU students.

While these projects undoubtedly will include some natural inconveniences that come with construction, I ask that you keep in mind that these are temporary issues. In five years, many elements of the campus will be transformed by the great teaching that will happen inside these new buildings.

As I said earlier, graduation is in 10 days, but truly, graduation begins every day on our campus. Each day that our students walk into your classrooms, email you with a question, come to your office for advising – each day moves them one step closer to graduation.

I thank each of you for taking time to attend this celebration today, and may God bless each of you as we travel on this transformational journey together.

This moves us to the part of the program where I get to play Bob Barker and give away a car. Over the course of the past two weeks, we have sought nominations for the Bert Bach Servant Leadership Award, an award focused on dedication and service to our students. This award is named in recognition of Dr. Bert C. Bach, someone who has dedicated his life to higher education.

At this time, I would like for Joe Trujillo, owner of Johnson City Honda, to come forward and assist with the award presentation. Johnson City Honda has generously donated the use of a new vehicle for the next two years to this year's recipient. Thank you, Joe, for your support of the ETSU faculty and staff.

The recipient of the 2015 Bach Servant Leadership Award is described by nominators as someone with "positive energy," is "dedicated to students," and has an "exuberant personality." One student wrote, "She is the reason I am graduating on time with the degree that I want," and that "she has made a mark on my life and I will be forever grateful for her and everything she has done for me." Another student added, "I am blessed to know her, and I hope to one day impact another person the way she has impacted me."

Please join me in presenting the 2015 Bach Servant Leadership Award to Dr. Stacy Onks, Director of the University Advisement Center. Dr. Onks, if you would please join me....