

Spring, 1996, Commencement Address

By C. D. Spangler, Jr.
President

University of North Carolina

Governor Hunt; Chancellor Eakin; Chairman Ward; trustees, faculty and staff of East Carolina University; members of the Class of 1996; parents, grandparents; and all other friends of this institution.

It is a wonderful honor to be here with you today. In my ten-plus years as president of the University of North Carolina, I have had the pleasure of attending about 50 graduations and speaking briefly, but I have given few full-fledged commencement speeches. I am *here* today because I want you to know I am very proud of this place. I am proud of the rich history from which you are molded and of the important role ECU has played—and continues to play—in the cultural and economic growth of this region.

I also take pride in your success for a more personal reason. Some nine years ago I stood before the UNC Board of Governors and advised them that Dick Eakin was the right person to lead East Carolina University to greater things. He was the *first* new chancellor I recommended after becoming president of the University, and I am relieved and delighted that time has proved that decision sound. Very sound.

Chancellor Eakin was, of course, fortunate to have followed the able leadership of Chancellor John Howell, who left this institution in strong academic and strong fiscal condition.

I have had many opportunities to talk with various groups about the strengths of our University and our state, and it didn't take me long to figure out that it is *impossible* to talk about the economic and cultural growth of eastern North Carolina *without* mentioning ECU in the same breath. The two topics simply cannot be separated.

I believe this is because when ECU was founded almost 90 years ago, it was envisioned as a lever that could help lift this part of our state into the modern age. While the state was finally working to establish public schools in the rural, painfully poor East, trained teachers to staff them were in critically short supply. ECU, then called East Carolina Teachers Training School, was created to provide those teachers, but only after a lengthy regional rivalry over which of eight towns would be the home of this school.

Through persistence, creativity, and old-fashioned spunk, Greenville won out over towns that were *then* twice its size: turn-of-the-century metropolises such as Kinston, Washington, Elizabeth City, and Edenton. The people of Greenville and Pitt County were so convinced of the economic importance of a college here that they agreed to do something virtually unheard of in those days to attain it: they voted on bond issues totaling a *mind-boggling*

\$100,000 to support it. Records show that of Greenville's 329 registered voters, 321 cast votes in support of the bond issue. Of the eight people who did not vote, two were sick and three were out of town. Only three Greenville voters were unaccounted for. Now, Governor, that was the kind of election results we like.

That kind of steadfast commitment and community support have helped make ECU the powerhouse it is today. Overwhelming community support was displayed again in 1993, when Pitt County voters turned out in droves to help our University win a \$310 million bond issue for systemwide capital construction. Your new Joyner Library addition, financed by those bonds, is tangible evidence of the strong ties that bind ECU to the people of this region.

Robert Herring Wright, your first president, adopted ECU's motto, "To Serve," as a mandate to use the resources of this institution to improve the quality of life for eastern North Carolinians. Wright urged early graduates to "go back to our people as teachers, take hold of existing conditions, and lead our people forward to something better." I am proud that while the depth and diversity of ECU's offerings have expanded far beyond teacher education, that initial commitment to service has never wavered.

ECU has become not only the pride of the East but the third largest institution of higher education in the state. Your teacher-education program remains the largest in the state, and your model clinical teaching program, which is revolutionizing the concept of student teaching in the public schools, has won a litany of national awards. I was surprised to learn that ECU actually pioneered the use of practice teaching in this state and was the *first* to send students to observe and intern in rural schools.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting a star of your education faculty, Dr. Patricia Terrell Campbell, when she received a 1996 Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching. I am thankful that many of you will follow her into the teaching profession, whether in elementary or secondary schools or at the college level. Our schools and our children need excellent teachers as they have never needed them before, and responding to that need is still one of the most important contributions ECU can make.

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Some 25 years ago, ECU Chancellor Leo Jenkins, backed by other community leaders, fought tooth and nail to bring better health care and medical education to eastern North Carolina. The ECU School of Medicine has in its short history earned a sterling national reputation for its production of primary-care physicians, its training of minority doctors, and its emphasis on rural medicine. You are making a tremendous difference through the work you are doing in placing doctors in small eastern communities, through training nurses and other health personnel, through a host of specialty clinics offered here in Greenville and in isolated areas, and through the emerging wonders of telemedicine. It is my hope that many of the 67 medical doctors receiving degrees today will help fill our state's pressing needs for better rural health care.

In myriad other ways, ECU has been the linchpin in what can only be described as an economic renaissance in this part of the state. Through your Regional Development Institute, your Rural Education Institute, and your Institute for Coastal and Marine Resources, faculty and students have applied their skills and knowledge to ever-changing community and industry problems that need sound solutions. You have much to be proud of, and an enviable track record to uphold.

And if you will bear with me for a few more minutes, I have a few words of advice as you graduates leave ECU to make your way in the world.

We often hear that the most successful people, the happiest people, are those who make a career of something they would enjoy doing even if they weren't paid for it. I believe this is true, and I urge you to think creatively about how to arrange such a future for yourself.

I suggest that if you can make the most of what you have, what you've learned, and if you can do it with honesty and concern for the future of our planet, you will be a credit to yourselves and to East Carolina University. This institution has a fine track record of producing leaders in all walks of life, and I have no doubt that you—each of you—has a contribution to make.

And to borrow again from your first president, I hope that you will retain ECU's pledge "To Serve" as a personal motto. Take *your* dreams, *your* talents, and the skills you have learned here, and apply them to the needs of whatever community you choose to call home. To paraphrase President Wright, go back to your communities, take hold of the existing conditions, and endeavor to lead your people forward to something better.

Thank you for giving me so much to be proud of, and best wishes to each of you as you leave this fine place.