

THE RISE OF ALPHA DOG

Topic
for an
ECU Oral History Focus
May 19, 2020

Historically, East Carolina University has been a target of critics who would oppose its very existence by deriding its rural eastern North Carolina heritage, and even the prediction that it was destined to ultimately “ ‘mount to something”. The brashness, persistence, and determination of the visionaries, who subscribed to the early progressive movement in public education in eastern North Carolina, caused a considerable amount of irritation, regional jealousy, and financial anxiety among some of the state’s more influential citizens.

Beginning with the competition among eastern North Carolina towns for the location of a new normal school for training teachers for positions throughout the state, to modern day efforts to expand and add programs to advance the progress and development of the region and the entire state, the way to universal respect has not always been easy for East Carolina University.

Early on, East Carolina advocates and supporters developed a “We’ll show ‘em “ attitude, a Herculean approach to difficult tasks, a work ethic equaled by none, and a “giant killer” expectation of over-achieving. Amazingly enough, this mindset has been infectious and has served as a strong motivating factor in some of the university’s greatest achievements. This “underdog” attitude, whether or not deserved, has become ingrained in the minds of generations of Pirate faithful, and manifests itself in the East Carolina spirit even into the twenty-first century.

East Carolina University is now well over one-hundred years old and boasting enough evidence of success at the highest level to convince the most skeptical of jurors. Promises made; promises kept!! When is enough enough? Is it time to cast off the “underdog” label, and transfer the boundless energies and pride of the Pirate Nation behind a more accurate and rightful “alpha-dog” image? Dr. Mary Jo Jackson Bratton, in her book , *East Carolina University, The Formative Years, 1907 – 1982*, wrote:

“ - - - The institution, first known as East Carolina Teacher Training School, was born amid a swirl of controversy, politics, and some said a mouthful of chewed and mutilated paper ballots. The school was fiercely competitive - and deeply loved and competitive - from the start. And the first seventy-five years of its history have seldom been serene.

This rapidly growing little college - - - - was seen in some parts as a brash and rowdy upstart when its enrollment spurts made it the third largest educational institution in the state. It was branded a political bully, when, aided by a powerful bloc of eastern rural legislators, it demanded a larger share of state appropriations and capital improvements and fought in the 1960s for university status and in the 1970s for a four-year school of medicine. But if ECU was pictured by some as an ominous threat to the traditional educational establishment of the state, it was hailed by others for its role as a catalyst for the reorganization of the state’s higher educational system, which resulted in the modern-day sixteen-campus University of North Carolina.

Through all of this, a spirit of love for the institution, of devotion and dedication by its leaders, faculty, and students, enabled ECU to prevail and flourish even in tumultuous times, to broaden the depth and diversity of its educational offerings and research, to enhance its reputation for both scholarship and educational opportunity, and to become a vigorous young university of first rank, one to be reckoned with in measuring success stories in higher education.”

The ECU history book edited by Dr. Henry C. Ferrell, Jr. entitled *Promises Kept, East Carolina University, 1980 – 2007*, states:

“Through all the years , despite hardship and hindrance, East Carolina University has upheld its pledge to remain faithful to its body of intentions; it was designed **to serve** those who helped to sustain it. ECU’s success has made students, faculty, alumni, and the community all an integral part of the continued mission to duly serve the populace, and thereby ensure a better education for the future.”

Big ships change course very slowly and deliberately, as do attitudes, notions, and perceptions. The transition from underdog to alpha dog will not happen without a conscious effort to do so, nor will it happen overnight.

It could take generations for the underdog image to wear out; it is too effective and convenient to let go easily. It is too engrained as a part of the Pirate soul and too identifiable with the Pirate spirit to readily move to an unfamiliar motivational mode. It has become like an old pair of shoes; we know we need a new pair, but the old ones are too comfortable to give up. Underdog has become the comfort zone, and the role of front-runner requires a completely different approach to the world. The **transition** is not easy, but like it or not, it is here and real. Embrace it, love it, enjoy it, and take great pride in the challenge.

ECU strives to be the best in all its programs, **winning is expected**, and it is no longer an *upset* when it is recognized as a leader among leaders.

ECU has rightfully earned **a dominant role**; is it now time to proclaim it so?

Donald W. Leggett

5/19/20