

TO: The Eastern Kentucky University Faculty Senate
FROM: Senator Michael T. Benson
DATE: March 29, 2018
RE: March Campus Report

As I type this, the Conference Committee of the General Assembly is still meeting in Frankfort to see if a final resolution can be reached within the next 36 to 48 hours. We certainly support the House version of the budget for many reasons and have been working hard with our elected officials to ensure our voices are heard and our funding can be restored.

In the midst of the uncertainty around the state budget, there is still much good to celebrate and positives to focus on with our faculty, students, and staff.

As you know, the University sets aside one week every April to celebrate the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, teaching and learning, and creative endeavors across all disciplines.

Perhaps no annual event better conveys the essence of Eastern as an outstanding institution of higher education than Scholars Week, which this year is April 9-13. Many of you are active participants in the week's activities, which are posted at ekuscholars.eku.edu. If not, I encourage you to attend as your schedule permits.

I am especially excited about an inaugural awards event on Monday, April 9, when, for the first time, six richly deserving faculty members will be honored, and receive \$1,000 each, for their exemplary work in the areas of high-impact practices, innovation in teaching, scholarship of teaching and learning, and faculty leadership.

The week concludes on Friday, April 13, with the University Presentation Showcase for students and faculty, the Assurance of Learning Poster Showcase, and one of my favorites, the annual Scholars Assembly, where we honor the best of the best among our students and hear a little about how Eastern has impacted their lives. I always go away encouraged, inspired, and grateful that I have the opportunity to serve an institution like ECU that prioritizes teaching and mentoring, meaningful collaborative research projects involving our students, and the growth and success of all our students.

On that subject, I was proud to be on hand in Boston, Massachusetts, recently when ECU junior anthropology major Krate Bartosch presented the results of his award-winning research project on lemurs in Madagascar. Krate is the first college student from a Kentucky institution only the second student from any regional university nationwide to win the annual Award for Academic Achievement Abroad presented by The Forum on Education Abroad. Congratulations, as well, to his faculty mentor, Dr. Benjamin Freed.

The month of March brought another round of international recognition for one of our hottest academic programs. The Princeton Review has again ranked our Game Design program among the top 50 in the world.

International recognition also came to an ECU alumna this past month, when a lecture by sociology graduate Sonya Begay was included in the prestigious TED Talk series. The genesis of her talk about unhealthy uranium concentrations on the Navajo and Hopi reservations in Arizona was a senior paper in a class taught by Dr. Stephanie McSpirit approximately two decades ago.

Congratulations to Dr. Minh Nguyen, professor of philosophy, director of our Asian Studies Program, associate director of our Honors Program, and coordinator of National and International Scholarships and Fellowships, for being accepted into an NEH Summer Institute, Self-Knowledge in Eastern and Western Philosophies.

Kudos, as well, to psychology professor Dr. Myra Beth Bundy for winning a professional service award from the Arc of Kentucky, an organization that advocates for the rights of citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This is a perfect illustration of exemplary work by faculty outside the classroom to serve the region and Commonwealth.

More national attention for what we do to help veterans and their dependents: ECU ranks among the Top Military Friendly Online Colleges, according to SR Education Group, which considers factors important to military students: tuition, military culture, prevalence of support services for online students, flexibility and military-specific financial aid. It was announced recently that two more entire baccalaureate degree programs will be available online beginning this fall: criminal justice and sport management. Additional such announcements are forthcoming.

As you know, the ECU Board of Regents will be meeting next Friday, April 6th at the ECU Center for the Arts. The agenda will be posted shortly and for those wishing to participate in the meeting but unable to attend in person, a live stream will be made available. More details will be forthcoming at www.ecu.edu

Finally, as this legislative session comes to a close in Kentucky (and as other states conclude their sessions as well), I've thought a great deal about the choices we make as a society relative to funding – what we choose to support and why. And if we chose *not* to support a government activity and function for whatever reason, what excuses do we give or rationale do we employ to justify our actions?

These questions helped to frame an article I was asked to write back a few weeks ago and which was just published in *Trusteeship*, the bi-monthly magazine of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. I hope you will find it of interest.

Thank you for your continued service to ECU.

We Can Do Hard Things

BY MICHAEL T. BENSON
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This past summer, my family and I made our annual trip to Lake Powell—one of the most majestic and beautiful spots on earth. But instead of using our usual means of air travel to convey us west from the Bluegrass state, we opted to drive from our home in Richmond, Kentucky, to Page, Arizona. Our goal was to see America. Nearly 4,000 miles later, we scratched that off the family bucket list.

One of our extended stops was in Bluff, Utah, where my wife’s ancestors settled in the 1880s. Her relatives were among 80 or so pioneer families who journeyed 260 miles over six months through incredibly arduous winter conditions via the famed “Hole-in-the-Rock” passage in Glen Canyon in south central Utah.

To this day, historians consider this expedition as one of the most extraordinary wagon trips ever undertaken in North America. Many sections of the trail were nearly impassable. To allow wagon passage, the intrepid pioneers spent six weeks blasting and chiseling a path through a narrow, 1,200-foot drop in the sandstone cliffs to the Colorado River below. The path is still visible at present day Lake Powell. After settling Bluff, the local families adopted this motto for the town and its inhabitants: “We Can Do Hard Things.”

When it comes to the important work of educating the rising generation, too often we hear from well-meaning elected officials and others that given the encumbrances on government budgets, we “just can’t afford to invest in higher education” or “times are just too tough right now.” One only needs to consider two of the most far-reaching public policies of the 19th and 20th centuries—the Morrill Act of 1862 and the G.I. Bill of 1944—as examples of America doing “hard things” during two of the most difficult periods in the nation’s history.

Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act into law on July 2, 1862, creating state colleges and universities throughout America roughly 75 days before the single bloodiest 24-hour period in our nation's history: the Battle of Antietam. On that day in Maryland, 22,717 Americans were killed, wounded, or went missing.

Fast forward to June 1944 when, in the throes of World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act—known colloquially as the G.I. Bill— just 16 days after the invasion of Normandy by the Allied Troops.

Certainly, public officials facing the Civil War and World War II had every excuse to say times were too hard or they could not afford to invest in higher education. Instead, they acted boldly, knowing of the positive influences of post-secondary education and all its collateral benefits to the nation and its citizens. These legislative measures helped expand educational opportunities and access to a new cohort of college-going Americans who matriculated and earned their degrees.

And, more often than not, a new level of expectation among their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren was established. A college degree today is the portal to a better life. Education has helped to usher in unprecedented prosperity and innovation.

At some of the darkest moments of our nation's history, two prescient presidents helped enact two of the greatest social policies ever passed. Both addressed post-secondary education. There is much to learn from the foresight of these two remarkable public servants and their belief in the power of education to change one's life and transform a nation.

My hope is that the nation will take note of the examples of Lincoln and Roosevelt as we continue to see many state legislatures diminishing their investment in higher education. As Benjamin Franklin asserted, "An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest."

It falls to us, particularly those at public higher education institutions where the large majority of American students study, to secure two absolutely essential elements of post-secondary education as envisioned by the Morrill Act and the G.I. Bill: access and affordability. It won't always be easy. But, then again, we can do hard things.