

# VISION2020

## VISION STATEMENTS

### Penco's quest for the best

Penco Products, America's oldest manufacturer of steel lockers and shelving, is based right here in eastern North Carolina, and we celebrated 150 years of business success in 2019. In partnership with our distributors, Penco is paving the way with progressive values and visionary leadership that can function as a model of inspiration for other businesses in our community.

In 2001, we relocated our manufacturing plant from Philadelphia, Pa., to Hamilton in Martin County and, in 2013, our corporate headquarters moved to Greenville. The process was met with challenges, and for several years Penco's bottom line did not reflect the dedication and effort of our team. A half a dozen years ago, we experienced a tipping point. Tom Kulikowski saw an opportunity to steer the business in an upward direction and accepted the role of president and CEO of Penco. His leadership, along with the hard work of the Penco Team, inspired three challenges that helped it regain traction:

- Assess the work environment and clean it up: Tom observed the historical practices at the plant in Hamilton and devised a strategic turnaround. He infused the Penco family with his vision: "Inventing a New Future," calling for teamwork, product line upgrades, growing our distribution channel, strategic shifts and additions, improving safety standards and procedures, and reducing inventory. Our quality improved, we had record-breaking accident claim reduction, productivity increased, and we began seeing positive revenue gains.

- Communicate by example: Last year, Tom built on the vision to invent a new future by declaring, "Our Future is Now!" He met with the Penco family and communicated the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly about our financial performance and productivity. We modified some products, adjusted our processes, added equipment and empowered our team through employee engagement training. Penco celebrated 150 years of successful business through black-tie and family-fun events, giveaways, and more to boost morale. "Project Hedgehog" established a system for team members to share ideas and it sparked innovation and retained.

- A quest to be the best: The Penco family this year set individual goals to push themselves into becoming "the best" in all areas of life through connecting with ourselves, our teammates and our community. When we are better as individuals it reflects in our jobs. When we communicate better with each other, accuracy and efficiency improves. When we connect with our community we help others, build our own character and make our community stronger.

"We are here to make a choice — a choice between being average or committing to be the best," Kulikowski said. Penco has experienced tremendous growth and success over the years, but at the core of Penco is our desire to serve our community and see it grow. Penco is America's No. 1 manufacturer of lockers, shelving, pallet racks and hygiene and textile products made available through a nationwide network of distributors. Visit the website at [www.pencoproducts.com](http://www.pencoproducts.com) for more information.

— Naya Powell is marketing creative specialist Penco Products.



**NAYA POWELL**

### Third Street develops workforce

Everyone has God-given potential. This is a core belief at Third Street Education Center, a nonprofit with the mission of educating and equipping in ways that bring dignity and hope. Started eight years ago, the center's long-term vision is to see generations transformed by the power of the Gospel.

We are one center with one vision but three distinct branches: Third Street Academy, Third Street Business and Workforce Development and Third Street Community Impact. Third Street Business and Workforce Development (TSBWS) provides a bridge for gainful employment for those who have been difficult to employ.

TSBWS was created in 2014 out of a need to maintain our 15-acre property. We bought all the equipment and decided we wanted it to be used to make a difference the other six days a week. Soon, we started our first business program called Third Street Facility Services. Word spread, and soon our services were in high demand. As more people hired Facility Services we hired more workers, most of whom either were involved with the justice system or who were recovering from substance abuse disorder.

The landscaping business grew, employing more and more individuals. In 2019, we added more business programs. When someone asked for a handyman, we had a highly skilled worker who could get the job done and now runs a full-time crew of three. When our kitchen was renovated and equipped to meet the Academy's growing needs, we hired an experienced chef knowing we would launch a full-scale catering business program. When Brown & Wood, a local car dealership, saw our work ethic installing flowers at the property, they asked us to take over the auto detailing operation, birthing our fourth business program.

In all four of these business programs, the participants learn a valuable, marketable job skillset and develop professionalism and a strong work ethic. They then transition to full time employment. When TSBWS staff first arrive at Third Street, they are often hopeless and out of options. They need hope and we help supply that as we provide a chance to gain experience, a positive employment record, and certifications that help move their resumes to the top of the stack.

One of the most powerful aspects of the initiative is that it is financially self-sustaining, and any revenue produced that is not used to fund business operations goes right back into the Third Street Education Center program.

Employment has always been a need that Third Street has wanted to address because it brings dignity and hope, but we did not know this would be our path to get here. Over the years, we are so thankful that our core belief that everyone has God-given potential has made TSBWS an integral part of who we are.

— Susan Nelson is director of community relations at Third Street Center. To learn more visit [www.thirdstreetec.org](http://www.thirdstreetec.org) or contact her at [susan@thirdstreet.org](mailto:susan@thirdstreet.org).



**SUSAN NELSON**

## Initiative seeks growth through ECU research

Rural Prosperity Initiative extends university resources to help rural economies.

BY GINGER LIVINGSTON  
Adams Publishing Group ENC

Generations of eastern North Carolina families have sent their daughters and sons to East Carolina University for 113 years.

While many returned home to become teachers, nurses, business people and later doctors and engineers, others left the east to make their way in other parts of the state, nation and world.

For those who stayed, the rural economy changed as big box retailers killed mom and pop shops and national supermarket chains did away with locally owned supermarkets and country crossroads stores.

As these businesses closed and bypasses swept past the edges of these small towns, their downtowns were left empty and fading away.

But where many see a lost past, East Carolina University leaders see a new future waiting, and they are dedicating the time and talents of faculty and students into revitalizing these communities.

Launched by former Chancellor Cecil Staton in the fall of 2017, the ECU Prosperity Initiative focuses the university's research and engagement expertise on finding solutions to disparities in health, education and economic development in rural and coastal communities.

Research teams are working in areas of biomedical science, precision medicine, health and chronic disease, health behaviors; energy and natural resources, marine and coastal systems, big data and analytics and STEAM education.

"The Initiative is a way to conceptualize the work that's been ongoing for many years and to think about it strategically and thematically," said Sharon Paynter, assistant vice chancellor in the Division of Research, Economic Development and Engagement.

"It is an initiative that lives in the research and the teaching and the learning of the faculty, staff and students at this university," Paynter said.

Slightly more than 10,000 ECU students come from the rural areas of North Carolina, mainly from the east, said Keith Wheeler, executive director of ECU's Office of National Security and Industry Initiatives, which is part of the Division of Research, Economic Development and Engagement. That is almost twice as many as the next UNC institution, said Wheeler, a Dare County native.

The prosperity initiative, and its stated goal of improving rural life, is important because it helps sets ECU's mission of service apart from other University of North Carolina System institution, he said.

Once the broad goals of improving the region's economy, health and education were set, Paynter said ECU leaders looked at the work already underway to build upon it.

"The university made an institutional, strategic commitment to grow research," Paynter said.

ECU has almost doubled its research during the last three to four years, building on "multidisciplinary, collaborative efforts" in areas where it already has strengths such as telepsychiatry, environmental health, water quality and responding to environmental disasters to name a few, Paynter said.

"Where we started was to understand better what we were already good at, what we are already doing and what we need to build on," she said.

The university's research grants have grown from slightly less than \$10 million in 2016 to \$34 million in 2019.

Part of that involved meeting with elected leaders, citi-



**ETHERIDGE**



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zens, industries, nonprofits and other interested parties to find out what mattered to them, Paynter said.

Randall Etheridge, a faculty member with the College of Engineering and Technology, is a Beaufort County native who grew up in Pitt County.

After earning multiple degrees from North Carolina State University, Etheridge joined ECU's faculty in 2015.

"Randall wanted to use his engineering knowledge to do something that mattered," Wheeler said.

One of his early projects was studying water quality issues at Lake Mattamuskeet in Hyde County, focusing on the disappearance of submerged aquatic vegetation.

However, when the county sustained back-to-back bouts of flooding following Hurricane Joaquin in 2015 and Hurricane Matthew in 2016, which caused millions in crop losses, the community's interest turned to mitigating the damage.

The Hyde County Soil and Water Conservation District had questions about whether the flooding was being driven by delayed maintenance of canals that drained the county's farmland and asked Etheridge to find answers.

Etheridge's team of students found that dredging would lessen the flooding to some degree but rising sea levels resulting from climate change also contributed because they reduces the flow rate out of the canals.

There also was a question about whether dredging the canals would transport the lake's water quality issues to the Pamlico Sound, an important area for shell fishing.

As Etheridge and his team weighed these questions, the North Carolina Coastal

Federation was launching an initiative to create a watershed restoration master plan for addressing the water quality and flooding issues. Etheridge and his students became part of that process.

He received a \$299,454 grant from the National Science Foundation last year for a project that will have ECU seniors and community members working jointly to research and develop plans to mitigate flooding in Hyde County and other coastal communities facing similar flooding issues.

Small communities typically don't have the financial resources to hire private engineering firms to design solutions to flooding, Etheridge said.

"Our goal is to put some of the expertise of the students and pair with the expertise of community members to help advance the engineering process for these communities at minimal cost," he said.

The students will begin their work in August, meeting with officials from Hyde County, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, the tourism sector, Lake Mattamuskeet Wildlife Refuges and others.

The students and local experts will develop three design options with the goal of presenting Hyde County and other communities an idea of the costs and effectiveness of each solution.

"Then (the communities) will be able to focus on one solution to move forward with and apply for grants and funding for that one solution and it hopefully cost them less — if our project is effective," Etheridge said.

Community involvement

is a critical component of the project, he said.

"One thing that was pretty clear initially and has become even more clear as we've gone through the watershed restoration planning process is that the way of life in Hyde County is very important to the people there and that's one of the biggest inputs they've had, they want to preserve that way of life and it's one of our goals," he said.

Being a good partner means doing more listening than talking and bringing forth information so people can make decisions they can carry out, Paynter said, explaining how the initiative functions.

"The university cannot do this alone. It's neither our role nor our expectation to come into a community and tell them how to recruit people to live in their place," she said. "What we can do is act as a facilitator, act as a connector, act as a convener of conversations in which communities identify the things they feel best define them, best showcase them and use the resources that they've got while identifying the needs they have."

Another means of encouraging community growth is the Rural Innovations Strengthening Eastern 29 Counties, or RISE-29 initiative, a program funded with a \$1 million grant from the Golden LEAF Foundation.

Working through the Miller School of Entrepreneurship and its partners, opportunities will be created to help ECU graduates to establish new businesses in towns throughout Beaufort, Hyde, Martin and Pitt counties.

Students also will be teamed with existing small businesses looking for succession and continuity plans as the small business owners prepare for retirement.

The goal is to create 25 microenterprises and 100 new direct jobs.

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