

**Diane Chapman:** I'm here with Chancellor Karrie Dixon, Elizabeth City State University, and thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Definitely. I'm excited about the conversation.

**Diane Chapman:** Me too. I've been looking forward to this. To start things off can you tell us a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? Where'd you go to school?

**Chancellor Dixon:** I am Karrie Dixon. I serve as chancellor at Elizabeth City State University, and I am a native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I have been in North Carolina all of my life. I started out in public education, completed public education from kindergarten through 12th grade, went off to a private institution to start my college journey.

Stayed there for one year, didn't feel like it was the right fit for me and transferred to North Carolina State University after my freshman year. So I actually came into North Carolina State as a transfer student. So I have some experience in understanding what it means to be a transfer student at a large university.

I spent three years of my undergraduate journey at North Carolina State. Graduated in 1997 and from there I went off to work at an NBC affiliate. My major was communications and interpersonal communication was a concentration that I had and also a concentration in public relations and a minor in English from NC State.

My first job was at an NBC affiliate in Winston-Salem, WXII, and I worked there for a while. I thought television was my passion at the time. It was what I wanted to do. I later found out about a year and a half later that it was not my passion and I found a love for teaching at the collegiate level.

I had an opportunity when I enrolled at UNCG to be a teaching assistant. As part of my graduate program, and so that was the first time I entered into the classroom to teach on the collegiate level, and I loved what I was doing. I loved to see the growth and the development of students throughout the semester, and that's when the light bulb went off.

And I basically realized at that point that my passion is being in the classroom, teaching and engaging with students and observing their learning process and being a part of that, facilitating that for them. I enjoyed that so much that I decided to stay in higher education. I had an opportunity to work on a pilot

program that focused on retention, and I was assigned 25 students who were on academic probation at the university, and were going to be dismissed after the spring semester if they didn't bring their GPA up over a 2.0.

During that semester I had an opportunity to teach them time management life skills, how to navigate a collegiate campus, and things that we often take for granted when we look at students coming out of high school and transitioning into college. So that experience at the end of that semester, 23 of the 25 students raised their GPAs up over 2.0 and were able to come back in the fall.

The two that did not, one decided that college just wasn't for him, and the other decided that she wanted to go into the military. So when I realized how important it was to look at students from the standpoint of their academic and social integration, I understood that I wanted to do something to impact that in a positive way for the student experience.

So I enrolled in a doctoral program at NC State. I went back home to the Wolfpack. The doctorate program was in a college of education, and so I received my Doctor of Education degree in 2003. It took me three years to finish that program. And what really was just my driving force was the fact that I wanted to do something to impact policy, to create policy, to revise policy, to implement policy, because I understood that policy guides everything that's done on the campus.

And when it comes to student success, student barriers, student challenges, it's sometimes the policy that justifies the action when it comes to those things. And so understanding the importance of what we put in policies and how we implement those things and how that impacts students. It was something that was really a great passion of mine.

So I worked at NC State. I taught in the communication department there at NC State as a graduate assistant while I was working on my doctoral degree. And was able to go back into the classroom during that time and teach the 100 level courses that we were able to teach and. work on my doctorate.

And once I finished that, I went into administration at NC State under the leadership of James Oblinger when he was Provost. And I knew I wanted to be in administration. I just didn't know how to get my foot in the door in that regard. So, talking to him, talking to the former Chancellor, Maryanne Fox, when she was there, was really helpful in helping me to open that door to administration. So I did that for a while at NC State from 2004 to 2008, and then I got a phone call from Chapel Hill and it was former president of the UNC

system, Erskine Bowles. And Erskine Bowles had a position that was vacant at the system office and he had a conversation with Chancellor Oblinger and he had heard about my work, what I was doing, my work ethic, and he asked me to come to the System Office to fill that position on an interim basis.

I was a little hesitant to do so at first because I always heard, when you go to the system office, you're going over to the dark side. And I didn't know a lot about the system because as a faculty person, and as an administrator at the university, I didn't really pay a lot of attention about what was happening at the system level.

So after a conversation with Oblinger and with President Bowles I decided to go for two years. I thought I was going back to NC State and my two years turned into 10 years. But one thing that I remember most that Chancellor Oblinger told me at the time was that if I go to the system office, I will see higher education from a macro level. I will be able to understand every piece of what we do as a state, in North Carolina, to educate our citizens from partnerships with the community college system, with DPI, with the private colleges and universities in the state. I had an opportunity to work with all of those agencies and also the legislature and the Board of Governors.

So he was right when he said it will give me a macro view of higher education at the state level. And that's exactly what I got out of that in 10 years. At the end of that 10 years, we had a new President, Margaret Spellings. Margaret Spellings was president of the UNC system and she needed some help in looking at what was happening at Elizabeth City State University, one of our 17 constituent institutions within the UNC system. She asked me to help her do an assessment of what was happening here because at the time the legislature was having conversations about closure of the university.

The university saw a 60% decline in enrollment. The university had 17 audit findings, and the university was on accreditation warning from SACS, so I was really being asked to come into a situation where there's no book or manual to tell you how to fix it. But what I did was I relayed back to my education from North Carolina State University, the faculty that I learned from, the mentors, the sponsors that I had.

And I used all of that to help transform the outcome of ECSU. So it was definitely a Herculean effort. But I didn't even think I was ready for, or I didn't even think that I was able to do what I've been able to do here because I just wasn't sure, it being a first chancellorship for me.

But like I said, always leaning on the preparation over the years is really what helped me to be prepared to do the work that needed to be done here at Elizabeth City State University. So I am the 12th CEO and seventh Chancellor at Elizabeth City State. And very proud to be at the helm and to see the progress that we have made during my tenure.

**Diane Chapman:** . I'm glad I get to see some of that progress around campus this afternoon, so I'm really excited about that. You mentioned one thing, and you mentioned that at a certain point you realized that the only way to make change was through policy. How did you come to realize that?

**Chancellor Dixon:** The experience I had in the pilot program, I understood that everything that was guiding the situation that those students were in was based on policy. And we look at student success policies, we look at academic progress policies, all those things guide how the student experience is really administered as students come in and out of the university.

So when I saw some of those things that were challenging to these students that were contributing to some of their experiences from the standpoint of being lost trying to navigate the campus, I knew that we could do better, but I also knew that part of doing better is revising those existing policies.

We can't think that a policy that's been on the books for 15-20 years applies to the student of today. We always have to go back and revisit these policies as living documents, to look and to see what has changed. What are the data showing us? How can we improve the things that need to be done so that our students can have a fair chance for being successful? And that's really what drove me to look at policy and to be able to create it, revise it, implement it, and I was able to do all of that at the system level.

**Diane Chapman:** . I think you described your professional path a bit and how you got to where you are today. So let's skip that for now.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Okay

**Diane Chapman:** What do you think makes you uniquely suited for this job as Chancellor? Because not a lot of people are going to be chancellors.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Here's the thing. I didn't think the chancellorship was in my path as soon as it was presented to me. At the time I was 43 years old and I had wonderful experiences that I will never take for granted from the standpoint of being able to learn and understand higher education from a macro level, being

able to work with faculty across the system, across the 17 institutions, staff, chancellors, provost. Understanding that each university within the system is unique and different in their own special way and understanding how the university operates from the standpoint of effectiveness and efficiencies. So all of that really helped me prepare for the chancellor position. Now, did I think it was going to take a few years later in my life to get to that point?

Yes, I did. I thought every day, every position is an opportunity for preparation. For me, what was more important for me is that I wanted all the tools in my purse. I know you always say tools in the toolbox, but as a woman, I say tools in my purse. I wanted all the tools ready. So when that opportunity presented itself, I would be ready to walk through that door.

Being a chancellor is something that I'm very proud and happy to have been able to accomplish. I didn't go into the ideal situation though. The situation I walked into was one that, some people told me, don't do it. It'll ruin your career. You have a great future ahead of you if you go there you won't be able to get the job that you may want later on.

So I had all these voices telling me different things about taking the position at ECSU and I have to be honest, I applied for the position on the very last day it was posted. The president of the system did a national search. That was important to me because I knew that if I applied, I wanted to be the one the people chose, the faculty, the staff, the students, the citizens, the stakeholders.

I wanted to be the one they chose. I wanted to be as competitive as anyone else was in that pool. And so not thinking anything about me being at the System Office, being a part of the team that came here ahead of time. I wanted to be the one that they wanted because I knew if I did not have the support of the campus, I wouldn't have been able to do the things that I needed to do.

The support of the faculty, the support of the students. So I knew I had to come in with a vision that they could buy into and that they could get behind and be there with me as partners. So that in itself is really what has been most important to me. Being in this role and being at that time, the youngest chancellor in the UNC system. Now I'm not because ECUs chancellor is. So I don't have that title anymore. But at the time it was something that I was really excited about.

**Diane Chapman:** How does a faculty member, you were a student, you were a faculty member. You were an administrator, you were at the system office.

You've had all these roles. But how does a faculty member include leadership into their career? Is it different at different career stages?

**Chancellor Dixon:** That's a really good question. I often reflect on that. I'm considered a non-traditional path chancellor or president, and it's mainly because I did not go through the faculty ranks. I had those experiences as a full-time lecturer, as a TA, as a GA, all those types of titles that just were non-faculty or non-tenure type of opportunities.

But I enjoyed it. I enjoyed being in front of the students. I enjoyed teaching. And even after I received my doctoral degree, I taught at NC State another , two to three years as a full-time lecturer. I reflect on that sometimes because I think if I had a mentor at that particular time, a mentor may have suggested, "apply for this tenure track position" or do something like that. But because I did not have a mentor at that particular time, I was making those decisions on my own, thinking this would be something that I would want to do, or this could be something that, here's the path. So when I say I never thought I could get to the chancellor position as quickly as I did, it was mainly because I was alone on that journey. I was still thinking about, "Should I have gone the tenure tracks? Should I have gone the more traditional route?" What we see now across the country in higher ed is that shift where you don't have as many traditional path presidents and chancellors. You're seeing this shift to more non-traditional. So it's almost like everything panned out for me at the appropriate time based on what it was that the university needed. And I think a lot of it comes from what is the need of the institution when it comes to leadership. I also think boards of trustees and boards of governors are also understanding more about the role of the Chancellor and the Provost.

Very different roles. And when you look at the qualifications of the Chancellor and the Provost, they can look very different and still mesh quite well together to be successful as a leadership team at an institution. I think more and more there's talk about boards recognizing that more. For me, it aligns with my path. So as a faculty member, I would say as far as leadership, I would say do all the professional development opportunities. If you want to be a leader in higher ed, no matter if that's department head, dean, provost, chancellor, preparation is key. And when I say preparation, I mean look at those opportunities for professional development.

Those opportunities to build networks of colleagues across the country that you can call on, that will look out for you if there are opportunities that open up on that path of how you plan to climb the ladder. And for me it was helpful. I was in the AASCU MLI program. It's a leadership program where I was a protege in

Washington DC in 2013. That Millennium Leadership Institute protege was something that was important to me because I wanted to know at that time, that was 2013. I wanted to know at that time if I was really interested in being in leadership of an institution. And I thought maybe that program would help me understand the ins and outs that I did not realize or I did not know about.

And it really did. It was a very intense program and it taught me a lot about leadership. It taught me a lot about the expectations of a president or a chancellor. It taught me a lot about what it means to have authentic leadership and being yourself and being happy with who you are in that leadership position.

That was important to me because I know often what I observed is that women sometimes feel as though they have to act like men when they become the Head or the Chancellor or the President or the CEO, and we really don't. We don't have to act like men. We can be our authentic self and our leadership and still get the respect and the support that's needed to be successful.

But I observed in my time working with chancellors at the UNC system that sometimes we get lost in that. That was really a good experience for me. I also was an ACE fellow. The American Council Education Fellow, that's a really good program for traditional faculty. A lot of the members in my cohort came from the traditional route and were faculty, were deans, were department heads.

So it really introduced a lot as it pertains to higher education and leadership and preparation for those next steps, no matter if it's dean, department, head, provost, or president. I would say those things would be very helpful. And then just observing, shadowing leaders at your own institution or at other institutions, and ACE helps with that as well. Those professional development opportunities are very important. And then having those conversations with your department head. What your goals and aspirations are and how can you get more experiences outside of being a faculty member within the full organization?

Maybe it's going after a grant that looks at higher education from an organizational standpoint, or maybe it's shadowing the CFO or shadowing the Provost. All those things I think could be helpful for a faculty member interested in leadership.

**Diane Chapman:** I also heard you mention that having a mentor early on would be really helpful too.



**Chancellor Dixon:** Yeah, definitely. So one thing that I regret from my experience as I reflect back is I did not have a mentor soon enough, early enough in my career. I think a mentor would've helped me make some different decisions and possibly even help me negotiate much better and that would've been helpful.

I first identified, actually my mentor identified me, when I started my doctoral program at NC State. It was a faculty member named Dr. Sandra Williams. Who took me under her wing. She didn't know me. I didn't know her, but she saw something in me that I didn't see in myself at the time.

And she took me under her wing; became my mentor. And I often say, when I talk about mentorship, that mentors can look like you, can be the same gender, and can relate to you in all different kinds of ways. It could be having a personal conversation, having a professional conversation, having a spiritual conversation.

I could do all of that with Dr. Williams. My relationship with her, mentor-mentee, led me to identify more mentors. And I have to say most were women of different races, of different stages in their careers, but they all poured into me in a different way. And when I think about it my sponsors have been mostly men.

So I've had mentors and sponsors. I would say men mainly because higher education is predominantly led by men. When I think about my sponsors, most have been white males. I see the difference with a sponsor and a mentor is that with a mentor, as I mentioned, you can talk about anything. A sponsor, you don't talk about everything. You talk about your career, you talk about your goals. You prepare them to be able to wave your flag in rooms that you are not present in. And you give them those speaking points. You help them understand your goals and what you are aspiring to do, your preparation.

When they're in those rooms where there are not many women or you're not in there, they can wave your flag. And when something comes up, they can say, "Hey, why don't we ask Karrie to do this? She's well equipped to do it. She has a strong work ethic. Let's let her do it." A sponsor is likely that person who is in the position you are trying to get to and is also at the table, has a seat at the table that maybe you don't have. But they can wave your flag, they can be your champion, and they can help open doors.

A mentor can be very useful in a different way. On a personal level, as far as your journey in life and your career. How to help you to prepare yourself for



those things that maybe you don't discuss with a sponsor. So I've seen both work very well in my life and I have both and I'm very happy about those relationships.

I wish I would've had them sooner, but it has worked out quite well. Even from the standpoint of negotiation. Women don't typically do well with negotiation when it comes to new jobs, salaries, and other things that we may want. And what I've learned is that men have no problem asking for what they want. And women, because I think we have been traditionally labeled as too assertive or too strong-headed, or however they say it. We often retreat to a "I don't want to offend them. I don't want to miss out on this job opportunity, so I'm going to go for whatever they offer me." Whereas men will tell you in a heartbeat, "No, I'm worth more than that." So I think, as women, mentors will help prepare you for those conversations and will help you think about and do your research. Not to come off as being rude or nasty, but to say, "Hey, I did my research. I know how much you paid the last person. I know how much this job goes for in the market." And you have those data points that help support your conversation around your worth and what you mean and what you can bring to the table in that position.

**Diane Chapman:** You're making a great case for diversity, at least in sponsors.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Yes.

**Diane Chapman:** You've talked a little bit about this, and I'm just going to ask it in case that there is anybody else you'd like to mention or a type of person you'd like to mention. Who or what has been helpful along the way for you?

**Chancellor Dixon:** My family has been very helpful. I'm a first generation, or at least I used to be. I always tease my dad and say that because he went back to school for his undergraduate degree at the age of 63 and has finished his undergraduate degree. And my mother went to community college and finished her degree and became a nurse.

My family has definitely been my rock from the standpoint of instilling in me and my sister, my younger sister, who's also an NC State graduate, the importance of education, even though they didn't have it early in their lives. So I knew that in order for me to be successful, I needed to be educated and they were very supportive in that my family, my husband, my kids, have definitely been very supportive.

When I was working on my doctoral degree, I had my oldest daughter who's about to turn 21. And so my husband has definitely been a great partner in making sure that I finished my degree and finished it in three years in 2003. And I had a 13 month old as I walked across the stage to be hooded by Dr. Vaughn. You remember Dr. Vaughn?

**Diane Chapman:** Yes, I do.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Yes. Love him. And so that was very helpful and my kids, I have two daughters, have been very supportive over the years. And my husband's been a great partner. Over the years as well as I sought out what I wanted to do in my career and the goals and the aspirations that I've had.

They have been very helpful. Also, just the presidents that I have worked for at the UNC system office, I've worked for many, starting with Erskine and now working for Peter Hans. I've had at least seven over the 10 years. I think that I worked for six or seven, and I've learned something different from each one of them as it pertains to leadership.

Leadership styles were very different whether you like them or not. It's always something you can learn from. As I approach some of the challenges that I have as a leader, at my institution, I often reflect back on some of those experiences and some of those situations that I saw them work through as leaders of the UNC system.

I've had a lot of people who have been very supportive pouring into me the experiences, the help, the support. Another person is Harold Martin, who is Chancellor at North Carolina A & T State University. Harold was actually the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at the System Office when I started.

So though Erskine hired me, Harold was my direct supervisor. And he has been wonderful. He's had a long, successful career and he's been able to provide great insight to me over the years, even before I became chancellor, of preparation and what that looks like. And I often have things that I talk to him about... that I throw off to see what his thoughts are. And he's been very supportive as well. So I've been blessed to have very important people in my life that have served as mentors, as sponsors, as family members. Supporting me along the way. I'm so grateful for that.

**Diane Chapman:** That's wonderful. Especially getting into this role because I would think it could be isolating if you didn't have other people as a senior leader.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Yes. And another person I want to mention is Bruce Mallette. Do you remember Bruce Mallette? So, Bruce Mallette came to the System Office, I think three years after me, and he became my direct supervisor. He and I didn't know each other at all.

We just knew that we had both been at NC State but at different periods of time. So he and I connected very well, worked very well together, and he was definitely a great supporter of my growth through the administration at the system office and promoting me and doing things to provide professional development opportunities. He and I stay in touch to this day as I'm taking on this new role. He retired years ago, but he still kind of keeps up with what I'm doing, so he will be another one.

**Diane Chapman:** And you talked about this a little, how important your family was, but I'm sure that there's other aspects of this question too. How do you balance the different demands that come with your job as chancellor?

**Chancellor Dixon:** It's very difficult. I'm going to be very honest. It is very difficult. I often say work-life balance is so important, but it's almost like "practice what you preach." So I say that to my campus all the time to the faculty and to the staff, "work life balance. make sure " and then I don't do it myself. But it is very difficult. This is a 24x7 job. Even on vacation, you're still on. You just may not be present, but you're still on because if anything happens on the campus, you have to be ready to respond to it no matter where you are or what you're doing. No matter what time of the night, it's a 24x7 job from that standpoint. And it is very demanding. Often I hear people say that being a Chancellor or President is like running a business. An important attribute is business acumen that you have to have.

Yes, that's true, but that's not all of it. Running a business from the standpoint of business operations, yes, but there's so much more to this job. You have to be the counselor. You have to be the friend, you have to be the cultivator for donations and from donors, you have to be the ambassador.

You have to be the person who the students see as approachable. The faculty see. You have to be there. You have to show up, you have to be supportive. There are a lot of different demands that come into the position. Sometimes what people see is the hand waving and the events and the football games and basketball games. But it's so much more because you also have to be there for that student who comes in and says, I don't have anywhere to live. Or I've been living in my car for two days because I don't have anywhere to go. Or that student who may have some mental challenges and you are worried about

whether or not they got to the hospital okay. And so being on a small campus I know a good number of the students. I don't know all of them, but I know a good number. And if I don't know them by name, I know them by face. But you take all of that on and I tell parents, now, when I make decisions at ECSU, I make them from the eye of a parent because I too have a college student.

I have a junior. I know what it feels like not to know if you don't hear from your child in three days or something. And those types of things are parts of the job that people don't know because we don't really talk about it. With faculty and staff, if I have a faculty who feels like he or she has been left out of the departmental retreat or something. I can come up with all kinds of things, I want my faculty to know that I'm here with an open door. They can come talk to me. Some may say that's a bad thing, but I'm a personable person from the standpoint of yes, I'm the Chancellor, but I also feel what others feel when they're going through something that's bad or they're struggling. So I always like to say I'm a listening ear. I may not always agree, but I will listen and I will try to make a change if it's a necessary change. Because I think about it or I approach my job as chancellor to say I don't know what I don't know, and when I know, I have to do something about it.

Especially if it's something that I know we can do better with. Or something that I feel, okay, that shouldn't have happened to you, but here's some options, or here's some things you should think about. So I try to take time out to do those things. It's very important. But it's difficult to balance because of all those different things that come up, and when you have situations on campus where a student harms himself or passes away, you've got to be able to talk to those parents. And you have to be able to talk to those friends of that student. And it's hard. It's hard even from the standpoint of terminating people. The human side of you comes out, even in that situation, maybe not in front of the person, but you still feel it.

All of those pieces are really critical to being a successful chancellor or president that we don't talk about, but are part of the reality that often causes us to lose that balance. Even though I said I'm going to do better, I promise, I always say I'm going to do better. But that balance is very important because I too have to think about my physical and mental health and think about what's important that I can do to have some downtime. I'm going on vacation in a couple weeks and though I'm not going to be here, I still have my phones because you just never know. And who's held responsible? The Chancellor, the President. And we have to always be on, on our guard from that standpoint, but I will do better.

**Diane Chapman:** Yeah, it's a lot. But I can tell, just by our conversation, how approachable you are and how much you care.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Yes.

**Diane Chapman:** That's very obvious to me and that must make it even more hard because people want to approach you and talk to you. I can't imagine what it's like in the community, to be on 24x7, because I imagine when you go out to dinner, when you're out shopping, you're always recognized as the Chancellor.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Yes. Especially in a small town and here in Elizabeth City. I think the mayor corrected me one time when I was talking to him. I said, this is a small city. He said, actually it's about medium size. But I think, last count we have about 18,000 people here in this city. And you're right, it is very difficult. I very seldom go out to dinner here, and I learned that lesson because of one particular situation. I went out with my daughter and one of her friends to an Italian restaurant here. We got our food. I had six people come up to the table. By the time I was ready to eat, my food was cold. And then I can't go to the grocery store. I went to the grocery store to buy a carton of eggs and I was in the grocery store for 45 minutes. My daughter, I took her to Burger King and my daughter, who's at UNC Chapel Hill called me and said, "mom, were you at Burger King today?" And I said, "how did you know that? Yeah. I took your sister to Burger King." She's like, "oh, it was on Twitter." She said, "Chancellor spotted at Burger King." I said, what? So it is really that you live in a bubble and that was a difficult transition for me. It was a very difficult transition for me because I am used to being out and about, talking to people, being what some might call a social butterfly, and the transition to going in and more so living in a bubble was very difficult for me.

I always say that was one of the most difficult times of transition because I really couldn't be out there the way I used to be. Because everybody's watching everything and they have a certain expectation of what and who the Chancellor should be depending on where you are and how large of a city that you're in. It has been a journey.

**Diane Chapman:** I can imagine. What resources or tips would you identify for someone who's new to leadership?

**Chancellor Dixon:** I would say preparation is key. That's definitely one thing. Always look for opportunities for professional development. Mentors and sponsors are vital, so making sure you identify those people. No only means not now. You'll hear a lot of nos. That's one thing my grandfather told me years ago.

Eight out of 10 people will tell you no, but don't take no as the ultimate end all to your dreams and your goals. Just know that means not now and for you to really continue to work on your preparation.

Another would be to show up every day. Show up every day ready. With the situation that I had transitioning to the UNC system office I was called because President Bowles heard about me, Harold Martin heard about me. They didn't know me. I never met them, but I was called because they heard about the great work that I was doing at NC State.

And people sometimes will observe you and you don't even know it. And they're looking at you, they're paying attention to how you show up. And if you show up well, you never know, you may get that call when a job opportunity comes open.

Another one would be don't burn a bridge before you cross it. Preparation will help with that. Understanding what you're walking into, but doing your research and being prepared, and I like to think about that one from the standpoint of the negotiation piece. You don't have to be nasty, you don't have to be rude. Know your data points, do your research and go in with confidence and don't burn that bridge prior to crossing it. Just make sure that you have everything in place so you can cross it successfully.

Another one would be, don't burn the bridge after you cross it. And what that means to me is that you're always going to need someone. You're always going to need support. You're going to need buy-in to your vision. Be inclusive. Include people. Shared governance is critical. Understand the role of the faculty, that academics is the core of the institution. Without the academic core, without faculty, who will we be? And so having faculty representation in big decisions and being at the table understanding. One thing that I always say is I don't want a lot of yes people around me. I want people who are gonna say, Chancellor, have you thought about it this way? Chancellor, great idea, but let me tell you about another way of looking at this. I appreciate that. I appreciate that because I don't see myself as being the perfect know-it-all. I may have an idea, but you may have something even better.

And when I hear it even better, I'm like, oh yeah, that sounds great. And so I want people around me who are going to be thinkers. Who are going to be creative and innovative, who are not just going to sit around me and say, oh yeah, that's a good idea. Let's do it. I appreciate having good people, good thinkers around me because I want them to express what they think, what they

feel, and that helps shape the idea into something even more grand than I can come up with by myself.

So having those relationships. Not ruining those relationships and forgetting about the importance of that after you get the title is critical. You need people and you need a good team and you're not going to get good people to work with you if you feel like it's all about me and not about we.

The other one will be, do not forget the bridge that brought you over. Those people who have poured into you or poured into me in my own reflection, over time. You can't forget those people and what they've done. Even if that's just giving you a call in the morning and saying, have an amazing day, or I read this in the paper. Have you thought about how you're gonna address this, or let me give you some ideas. Those people are important. So never forget those people.

And then lastly, I created an acronym here that I use ACE. And ACE stands for accountability, commitment and excellence. When I arrived here at ECSU, morale was low. I went to a faculty senate meeting and I was in shock at what I saw. I saw faculty who had lost hope. I saw faculty who were not engaged. I saw faculty who were just burnt out, I've never seen a faculty like that before and I knew I never wanted to see that again. So pouring into people from the standpoint of, I told them, "we're gonna do this, but we're gonna do it together. We're gonna build that morale. We're gonna build the hope. I value you. I value everything you do because without you, I can't do anything."

So being transparent, that being part of my narrative with the faculty shared governance, and also including shared accountability and shared responsibility. We have to do this together. It's not about I, it's not about me, it's about we. It's about us. It's about doing this together because we have a task and I can't do anything to turn this university around without the support of the faculty and the staff. That was my message to them because what I saw, out of all the institutions I've been to, I've never seen a faculty that just looked so discouraged, with loss of hope, just burnt out just things over the years. I was the fifth Chancellor in five years here, the fifth Chancellor in five years. The very first year we had an employee satisfaction survey. We were number 17 of the 17 as far as our rankings before I came here. Last year, we were number one, with the highest rankings for employee satisfaction. And so I knew I had to do the work that needed to be done, but I also had to make sure that the people understood that they were an important and very valuable piece of that success. And it's all about what we can do together.



That has been my message here at ECSU. We've made great progress. We want to continue to push forward, continue the same energy, the same momentum, and just making sure that we're, I want to make sure we're building the foundation for sustainability of the future. This region deserves it. This university deserves it. Our people deserve it. Our faculty, our staff, our students, the citizens of North Carolina, we have to be successful and thriving. We're surrounded by tier one, tier two counties here in Northeastern, North Carolina, some of the most economically distressed counties in North Carolina. Without a senior institution that's thriving and sustained we do nothing for our citizens in this region, but they deserve access to a quality education, and it's our responsibility to make sure that we are here to do that.

**Diane Chapman:** You talked about this a little bit, and I'm going to combine the last two questions here. In an effort to continuously focus on wellness and our mental health, what activities, hobbies, or concrete ways do you take care of yourself? And as a part of that, I'm going to throw in what brings you the greatest joy or enjoyment to your work as Chancellor.

**Chancellor Dixon:** So, the wellness piece, I like to take walks around campus. I do that even now when the students are gone, most of them are gone, even though we just started summer school. But I like to take walks.

I like to look at the campus from the standpoint of beautification efforts and things that I see. With my background in marketing and communications I have an eye for that, so I know how important it is. First impressions mean everything. I also like to go to some activities that the students have.

I like to bowl. We have a bowling alley on campus. So I'll do some things like that. I'll go over and be involved in some of the activities they have. So those are my outlets. And if you notice, most of it involves students. So I would say the most enjoyable part of my job is really interacting with the students because I know the population of students we serve. I know that we were ranked number one HBCU in the country for social mobility, social and economic mobility. I know the college degree in this area transforms the lives of families. And when I'm having my worst day, if I go outside or walk into the dining hall, all of that goes away.

Because I see the students, they come up to me, they tell me about their day, and it really helps me reflect on the fact that I do what I do because of them. And I do what I do because they deserve the best and they deserve a great education. And the faculty as well, they deserve our best faculty, our best staff.

We have to retain them. We have to keep them here. We have to give them what they need to be successful in the classroom and to provide that quality education.

And one story I'll tell you because , I said one day I'm going to write a book about it, and I'll tell you what the title will be. So when I started here, I started making a lot of changes. And that's one reason why I applied for the job on the last day because I felt like I was being perceived or labeled as the hatchet woman, the change agent. Women, we get all these titles, right?

But I was making a lot of changes because I knew we needed to get off SACS warning. We had six months to do that. I knew we needed to clear up these audit findings, so it took a lot of difficult decisions. It took a lot of decisions around personnel, around restructuring. All those things I was doing constantly for the first six to eight months.

And one day I came into the office and the student body president requested to meet with me, and we all know if the student body president... I was thinking, oh my gosh, what do they not like? What am I doing wrong? I was like, what are they gonna say? So, the student body president came into my office, brought his executive cabinet, his name was Robert Boone. He brought his executive cabinet with him and they sat in my office and they said, Chancellor Dixon, we see progress. And I said, what? I didn't say what I was just thinking in my head like, progress, please tell me more. And they said, "we see progress". And I said tell me more about that. What do you see?

And they said, which is going to be title of my book, "we see fresh mulch around the trees" and I almost lost it. And in that moment I knew if my students appreciated fresh mulch around the trees and the grass being cut, and the campus looking a lot better than it did when they got here, I can do a lot more.

That was low hanging fruit. So when I heard that it was full force ahead and you'll see today this campus has come a long way. People in the community are talking about how beautiful it is. When I started here, I had legislators calling me saying the campus looked like trash. The campus was terrible. And this was around the same, just a few years later, after they were going to close it because of a 60% decline in enrollment and other challenges that it was facing.

It needed some tender love and care and it needed a vision for beautification. I went to NC State. I didn't pay attention to mulch around the trees because NC State is absolutely beautiful, every day. And I, as I thought about that, I was like, I really took that for granted.

But these kids deserve the best, they deserve the same quality experience as any other institution in the UNC system. I brought that here because I understood how important it was for a senior institution in this region as a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina to do better and to be better, and for them to say, we're excited about fresh mulch around the trees? I will never forget that in my lifetime journey ever, because that was something that really touched me. From the standpoint of they deserve more, they deserve better. If they're happy about fresh mulch, I'm gonna make them even happier about a lot of other things. And so I'm very excited about that piece and that is really the greatest enjoyment that I have as chancellor.

**Diane Chapman:** I think we're about at the end of our time. Once again, I really like to thank you for taking the time to talk with me today and taking the time to share your journey and your expertise and leadership and it's just been a pleasure.

**Chancellor Dixon:** Thank you. Thank you so much. I appreciate you being here.