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An Interview with Dr. Taylor Eighmy

By Sarah Russell

The University of Tennessee welcomed Dr. Taylor Eighmy in October of 2012 as the new Vice Chancellor for Research and Engagement. Dr. Eighmy comes with many years of experience working to develop research initiatives, grants, and contracts for university research, having previously worked at Texas Tech University and the University of New Hampshire. In an interview on January 22, 2013, he discussed the importance of research at public universities, his personal experiences with research, and his goals for research development at the University of Tennessee.¹

Dr. Eighmy believes that research must be at the core of the university experience, especially at public universities. At UT, he notes, “In addition to educating undergraduates, we have very strong graduate programs that are tied to study and knowledge generation. That’s what distinguishes us from a traditional liberal arts four-year college.” He cited the Boyer Report from 1998, which sought to identify several changes needed in higher education. One major focus of the report was on undergraduate research. The report suggested that at public research universities, research should be an “inseparable part of an integrated whole” in terms of curriculum and learning experiences. In other words, experiential learning like research projects should become essential to an undergraduate experience.² Research universities in particular should make the most of their resources to encourage research. As Dr. Eighmy says, at schools like UT, “We are in the business of generating discovery.”

However, a major obstacle to the advancement of research at public universities, as Dr. Eighmy points out, is a lack of support from taxpayers and the general public. He cites a poll published in *Time* magazine about higher education showed that 80% of U.S. adults felt that the college education that students receive today is not worth the price.³ “Now more than ever before,” Dr. Eighmy says, “the time has come for public research universities especially to do an excellent job explaining to the public why great research universities are essential to the future.” Because of their greater access to funding, private universities are often seen as producing a greater return on a student’s investment. As a result, “It has become the role of public universities to produce public benefit,” Dr. Eighmy says. Because UT is a land grant organization, he notes, the university has an obligation to provide public benefit to

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Knoxville, to Tennessee, and to the greater community. The university also needs to improve its communication with the public so that they are made aware of what goes on at UT outside of the occasional news about nuclear research and medical tools. As Dr. Eighmy says, “It’s essential to our future that we improve and maintain public support.”

In particular, Dr. Eighmy recognizes the importance of undergraduate research, having had a formative experience in his own undergraduate years doing research with a faculty member. His mentor at Tufts University was Dr. Jan Pechenik in the Biology Department. Dr. Eighmy says his work with Dr. Pechenik was what defined his undergraduate experience and prompted him to go on to graduate school, because he was able to participate in a hands-on research project studying gastropods. He describes his undergraduate research as “a moment that turned me into a person that was extremely interested in the world and in this notion of discovery and that was indelibly imprinted upon me for the remainder of my life.” His personal experiences have made him an advocate for undergraduate research, because engaging in research at an early level can spark that “lightbulb moment” that often inspires future research and career goals. “When I think about what it’s like to be an undergraduate today, with all the opportunities at an institution like the University of Tennessee, it still requires a moment when you realize that you can make a difference and can benefit greatly from an unfettered mind,” he says.

One of Dr. Eighmy’s tasks as Vice Chancellor for Research and Engagement is to continue to grow and expand research initiatives at UT, including undergraduate research. He will specifically focus on improving the connectivity between interested undergraduate students and research opportunities and mentors. One method that is being pursued is to use the Office of Undergraduate Research webpage to establish a portal that will match student interest with faculty interest to have as many undergraduates involved in research as possible. Other goals of the Office of Undergraduate Research are to continue to expand Research Week and the Exhibition of Undergraduate Research and Creative Achievement (EURēCA) to include as many students and disciplines as possible, as well as to grow the Undergraduate Research Summer Internships. Dr. Eighmy also hopes to create a chapter at the University of Tennessee of Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Society. Another

goal is to obtain certification through the Carnegie Foundation Community Engagement Classification for UT, which indicates the university's involvement with the greater community through scholarship, research initiatives, and creative efforts. This classification can help facilitate a better relationship with taxpayers by demonstrating the real connections that public universities have with the benefit of the community.

Dr. Eighmy believes that the atmosphere at UT is ripe for such advances in research, especially undergraduate research. "What's unique about us here is we have an interesting meld of discovery largely driven by the interest of faculty, and the best way for us to make a difference is to do this more at the undergraduate level I believe that there is enough interest at the faculty and the student level, because the clamor from the students is apparent," he says. Opportunities like Research Week, research-based honors programs, *Pursuit*, and the summer research internships provide the "ingredients for the advancement and promotion of undergraduate research."

Finally, Dr. Eighmy encourages students interested in research to visit the Office of Undergraduate Research to investigate their options. "Come by my office and visit me. I'm very interested in wanting to expose students to the resources available for students and faculty to come together and work on a project. The fact that we celebrate research every year and that we have an academic journal all point to the fact that we can do more of this and do it well. I'm intrigued about going a little beyond that and having it become part of the cultural transformation here as we become a Top 25 Research University. I think the future is very bright."

Endnotes

1 Dr. Taylor Eighmy, interview by Sarah Russell, January 22, 2013.

2 John W. Moore, "The Boyer Report," *Journal of Chemical Education* 75, no. 8 (1998): 935, accessed February 1, 2013, doi: 10.1021/ed075p935.

3 Josh Sanburn, "Higher-Education Poll," *Time*, October 18, 2012, accessed February 1, 2013, Education, <http://nation.time.com/2012/10/18/higher-education-poll/>.