A first-ever effort to marshal the combined resources of 12 East Carolina University colleges and schools, 14 centers and institutes and university partners behind a single, coordinated campaign, the “Rural Prosperity Initiative,” was launched Thursday, Sept. 14, by Chancellor Cecil P. Staton. ECU is focusing its extensive research and engagement expertise on finding solutions to the extraordinary disparities in health, education and economic development in rural and coastal North Carolina communities.

“A core mission of this university since it was established in 1907 was to serve the needs of rural, eastern North Carolina counties, initially by filling an enormous need for teachers and later by adding a medical school, a dental school and other initiatives focused on serving under-developed areas,” said Staton. “These efforts were enormously successful, and today this university produces more teachers, principals and education professionals, more primary care physicians who stay in North Carolina and more dentists serving rural areas than any other university in the state.”

Staton said a unique talent for serving rural and coastal populations developed within each new college and school as they were added to the university portfolio, and each adapted its programs to the needs of a rural, under-developed region.

“Our vision is to rally that extensive talent across this campus behind an initiative even more successful than each has accomplished individually,” Staton said.

Vice Chancellor Jay Golden, who heads the university’s Division of Research, Economic Development and Engagement, will lead the initiative. Golden said he is nearing completion of a study on the challenges and needs of rural eastern North Carolina counties and more broadly in rural America.

“Few people are aware that nearly 72 percent of U.S. land area is rural, including 1,976 counties, and 80 of our state’s 100 counties are classified as rural,” Golden told ECU trustees during a lunch presentation on campus Thursday. “People have been abandoning these areas for years, but 46 million Americans remain, with a poverty rate triple that in urban areas.”

In North Carolina, he said, the numbers reveal a striking need to address health, education and economic issues, the three-part focus of the initiative.

Golden told trustees one way he would identify success for the project would be that children in rural areas have the same opportunities for education and health care as those in urban communities.
“We’re not going to be a think tank,” Golden added. “We’re going to be an action-oriented organization.”

“People in eastern North Carolina counties have a 50 percent greater mortality rate from diabetes than the U.S. average, a 30 percent higher rate of lung cancer mortality, a 16.6 percent higher rate of mortality for all cancers and a 38.4 percent higher mortality rate for strokes,” Golden said. “More than 16 percent of adults over age 25 have less than a high school education.”

Nationally, while urban areas gained 1.2 million jobs in 2016, rural counties lost 90,000 jobs, he said. “Eight out of 10 jobs created in 2016 were in the 51 metropolitan areas of a million people or more,” said Golden.

Staton said the university expects to attack the challenges in rural counties in overlapping stages: preparing a detailed situation analysis county by county; gathering experts together to determine what projects have been most successful and where new ones might be most fruitful; and then engaging federal and state resources to assess where coordinated projects might be most effective. Then, ECU will develop an action plan.

“It’s important that our communities, our leaders and our various government entities be as united as this university will be in attacking these problems of rural America, and we’ll hold ourselves accountable with regular public reports,” Staton said. “Our vision is to test new ideas and combine those that work well with tried-and-true ECU methods, creating a roadmap that’s helpful to all of America.”

Staton said a strong foundation for the Rural Prosperity Initiative is in place already:

Among university-inspired programs focused on economic development and jobs is the 2015 designation of the Millennial Campus, which includes a seven-block, 22.3-acre warehouse district to be used by university researchers and industry/government entities to create and commercialize new businesses.
ECU Launches Major Rural Initiative

By Administrator
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Educational advances are expected with the 2017 launch of the ECU Lab School that focuses on the needs this year of second-to-fourth-grade students who have underperformed at traditional schools and tests new techniques that can be implemented in rural areas. The school will also provide resources to aid their development physically, socially and emotionally. The school will expand to pre-K through fifth grade for the 2018-19 school year.

Improved access to health care professionals across the region is expected through the formation of a new entity that integrates the physician groups of ECU and Vidant Health.

Eight ECU dental medicine service-learning centers are operating in rural areas across North Carolina, providing learning opportunities for students in the School of Dental Medicine and service to low-income residents of rural areas.

The university has organized several areas of the university into research clusters focused on job creation.

John Chaffee, executive director of NCEast Alliance, a regional economic development organization, praised the initiative, saying that understanding the intersection of health, education and development is crucial to success, and that ECU is positioned to play a critical role in making that happen.

“We've got to set the stage to better empower ourselves to create jobs and attract jobs to eastern North Carolina,” he said.