

feature story

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Setting the Standard

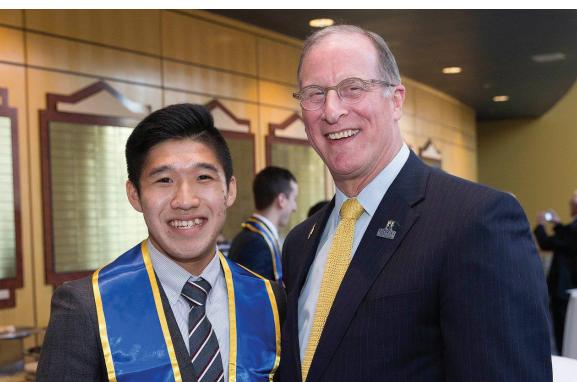
After more than a decade as dean of the Bryan School – and 42 years in higher education – Dr. McRae “Mac” Banks is ready for his next chapter.

In 2011, when Dr. McRae “Mac” Banks was approached about leading a business school in Greensboro, NC, he thought the location might be a sweet spot geographically. Banks and his wife had six adult children, who were scattered along the eastern seaboard between DC and Atlanta, and being close to family was important.

But when he accepted an invitation for an on-campus interview at the Bryan School of Business and Economics, the schedule didn’t include time with students. And that was a deal breaker.

“I told the provost at the time that if I could not meet with students, I was not interested in coming for an interview,” he says. “They adjusted the schedule, and I am so glad they did.”

In 13 years as dean of the Bryan School, Banks has not wavered in his commitment to students – or to the faculty and staff who guide them, his colleagues say. Now retiring after 42 years in higher education, he leaves a legacy of achievement, having grown the Bryan School’s enrollment almost 50 percent, built its reputation for research, increased students’ placement rates and starting salaries, and improved diversity among students, faculty and leaders.



"He came in with a vision and really made it come to fruition, despite budget challenges, faculty and staff turnover, and all the ongoing changes we face in higher education. People want to come to a school that is winning, and Dean Banks has done that here – not all alone, but with his team and his faculty and staff. The Bryan School is a different place now than it was. He's really elevated the profile."

DR. DEBBIE STORRS
Former Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor

In May, more than 150 people gathered to fete the Bryan School's long-serving leader on his upcoming retirement and thank him for his contributions to the School and UNCG, as well as to the business community and to higher education nationally. This came as no surprise to Beth Todd, the business manager for the dean's office, who notes that Banks has been a "tireless champion for his people, his students and his purpose – the Bryan School of Business and Economics."

'Two or Three Steps Ahead'

Much of his success stems from his focus on the future, Storrs says. "Mac is always thinking two or three steps ahead," she says. "He has created this ethos in the Bryan School where he encourages people to think outside the box and bring great ideas to him."

One of those ideas was the BONUS (Bryan Online Nontraditional Undergraduate Student) Initiative, which targets a key, growing demographic. The program is marketed specifically to North Carolina students between 25 and 45 who may have some college credits but not a full degree. This is an example of how Banks "made a pitch based on data, got his folks on board, and then the Chancellor invested dollars in that," Storrs said.

Through a similar focus on innovation, Banks has overseen the launch of 12 online degree programs, including the first online PhD program accredited by AACSB, the leading accreditor of business schools. With his support and increased funding for faculty research, professors now publish an average of 2 to 3 refereed journal articles annually. And during his tenure, the School updated curricula to require hands-on projects of all students, increased promotion and recruitment of graduates and undergraduates, and became one of the most

diverse business schools in the state. Some key indicators: the Bryan School graduates more African American and Latin undergraduate business students than any business school in NC; faculty from underrepresented groups has increased by 37%; the number of female professors has doubled; and female department heads have increased from one to four out of six total.

One of Banks's proudest undertakings may be the development of the Bryan Blueprint undergraduate curriculum. Local executives indicated in 2011 that Bryan students were extremely well trained, knowledgeable and often outperformed their counterparts, but sometimes lacked polish and executive presence. The School experimented with offering voluntary classes and events aimed at professional development and career readiness, but students didn't jump at them. Creating the Bryan Blueprint Series – and making it a graded, four-course, credit-bearing graduation requirement – changed that. Banks recalls one student who used what he learned in the class to secure a coveted summer internship by Thanksgiving. The student's family was so impressed that many of them asked him for help in developing their own resumes. This program not only helped this one student and the generations that will follow him but also the generation that preceded him.

Putting Students First

Stories like these have long inspired Banks, who always dreamed of teaching college students. After a business career in Chicago and a stint as a general manager of a small startup in Virginia, he returned to the classroom to pursue his doctorate at Virginia Tech. From there, his career in academia took him to Radford University, Mississippi

State and Worcester Polytechnic Institute before he arrived at UNCG. Almost immediately, he appreciated the strong ties between students and faculty here, which seemed especially unique at a large, public institution. Banks built on this strength, developing a Presidents' Council of students and meeting with them, as well as the Bryan Merit Scholars, regularly. Today, he remains connected on LinkedIn with thousands of former students, who are now professionals in a variety of sectors across the country and around the world.

"Everything we do is about the students first, foremost, and by far," he says. "Our primary purpose is to build a culture in which students feel that they belong and that we care for and about them."

His leadership has also strengthened the reputation of the Bryan School more broadly across academia, as he served on the board and as chair of the AACSB International Board of Directors. During a conference for that group, "his fellow deans told me how grateful they were to learn from and get advice from Mac Banks," says Interim Dean and Professor Dr. Joy Bhadury. "The dean is the face of the institution, and he has brought great visibility to both UNCG and the Bryan School."

His colleagues say Banks won't take sole credit for the Bryan School's success. "But none of it would have happened without his leadership – him asking questions, making suggestions, offering gentle nudges and sometimes even stronger pushes," says Dr. Bill Brown, Associate Dean of Internal Affairs. "Mac truly has empowered others and provided support, and that's why we've accomplished great things." ■

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