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Voices of the Cape Fear:

To stay relevant, you need to make changes to your thinking

By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer

MYRTLE GROVE | He's changed jobs, moved from teaching into administration, and come a long way from his farming roots wanting to study the genetic makeup of crops.

But during more than three decades at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, James Merritt's goal has remained unchanged.

"To give students the best education and access to the best facilities, to see that happen," said the retiring assistant director for UNCW's Center for Marine Science.

At the most fundamental levels, students haven't changed, either, Merritt said.

"In many respects students are students," Merritt said, his office at the center cluttered with books and papers epitomizing an academic. "Sure, there have been cultural changes and they're probably better prepared today.

"But their performance, that you have those that have more drive, isn't much different."

What is different from when he started as a biology professor, though, is just about everything else.

Merritt, a short, thin man with a wide smile, said there wasn't anything like an information technology department when he started.

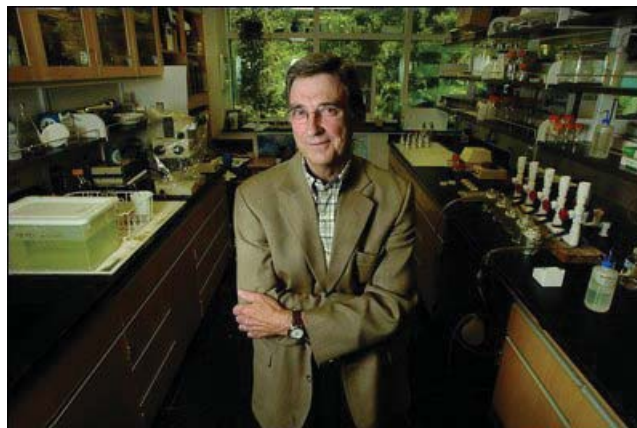
"Now they're some of the most important guys on campus," he said laughing.

UNCW's Crown Jewel

Like Wilmington and its neighboring coastal communities, UNCW has been on a growth binge of late.

From a regional campus with a population of around 1,700 when Merritt started in 1973, UNCW has become a thriving research institution with a student body of more than 11,000 and a growing national reputation.

Arguably the school's crown jewel



STAFF PHOTO | JEFFREY S. OTTO

James Merritt has been a faculty member at UNCW since 1973 and has seen the university grow from about 1,300 students to its current student body of nearly 12,000.

is the new marine science complex overlooking Myrtle Grove Sound that Merritt helped shepherd to reality.

The center has helped UNCW expand its research programs, attract world-class faculty and garner national recognition.

But the school's maturation, both in Myrtle Grove and on the main campus, hasn't been without its growing pains.

Skirmishes between students and residents and city officials flare up more often these days, especially over issues like parking, traffic and off-campus parties.

The new marine center facility has seen its own share of controversy, ranging from noisy roof-mounted heating and air conditioning equipment to not getting the right planning permission from New Hanover County to build an 82,000-square-foot facility.

Administrative changes on campus, including modifying teaching and research requirements for faculty, also haven't been without a few bumps in the road.

"To stay relevant you need to make

changes to your thinking and infrastructure," Merritt said. "And change doesn't always come easy."

Neither does growth, especially when you're cramped for space.

But like Southeastern North Carolina as a whole, Merritt said, UNCW has room to expand — literally.

Showing ambitious foresight, the school's founding fathers set aside 656 acres for the main campus along South College Road in anticipation of growth.

"I think we've been lucky in having that luxury all along," said Merritt. "If they hadn't, we would have been running into the same problems many other schools have run into as they've tried to expand."

Staying ahead of growth

Like Wilmington, UNCW is changing to meet the needs of a growing community, Merritt said.

The school has added offerings for lifelong and professional learners and modified its curriculum, including its research programs, to better reflect the skills today's students need.

As an example, Merritt points to

the new marine center, which in 2000 replaced a cramped building near the Wrightsville Beach drawbridge.

"To continue providing the services and growing those concepts, it was pretty obvious we needed a new facility," he said, noting that it was a natural fit for the only state school along the coast to have a world-class facility.

Granted, he didn't think it would take nearly a decade of lobbying Raleigh for the money to do it, he said with a wry smile. But the result, he said, was worth it.

"Now if researchers or students from across the state want to come and work or do research and then stick their feet in the salt water, they can," he said.

With education being one of the cornerstones of a community, Merritt said he's proud of what the institution UNCW has become.

"We've been all over the place emotionally," he said of his three decades at the school. "But everything being considered, the curve has gone up."

So has UNCW helped pull Southeastern North Carolina into the modern era? Or has the growing, more nationally and internationally connected region pushed the school to jettison its sleepy Southern roots?

Merritt chuckled and fiddled with his glasses and said it's probably been a bit of both.

UNCW has tapped into the human and business resources drawn to the region, he said. At the same time, the university has been pressured to create programs to meet their needs. The key for both the school and Wilmington, Merritt said, is to keep evolving to make sure they stay ahead of what's coming down the pipeline, not responding to it.

"The challenges of dealing with growth are a lot more fun than dealing with the changes caused by it," he said, smiling.