

# Provost shows passion to help others succeed

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Mississippi State University Provost and Executive Vice President Jerry Gilbert is passionate about facilitating success and recognition for faculty and students.

“I want our academic programs to be the best possible and I am anxious to see our faculty and students recognized for their achievements,” Gilbert said.

In his role as provost, Gilbert oversees the academic programs and affiliated programs on campus. He oversees the setting of standards and assessing of academic programs, including accreditation issues. He also provides input and leadership in hiring faculty and academic administrators, and participates in and oversees the promotion and tenure decision process for faculty.

Gilbert also interacts with the MSU Faculty Senate and serves as a liaison for academic affairs to the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning. It is his responsibility as provost to ensure the integrity and quality of the academic programs at MSU.

As Executive Vice President, Gilbert assists MSU President Mark Keenum in managing the operations of the campus and coordinating with the other vice presidents. He assists the Keenum in strategic planning of the university and in articulating the vision of MSU to the faculty, staff, students, alumni and to others outside of the university. It is also his responsibility to assist the President in budgetary and management recommendations that impact the teaching, research and service missions of the university.

As second in command, Gilbert serves in the President’s stead when he is away from campus.

“It is a great honor and privilege to serve as provost and executive vice president,” Gilbert said. “It is a dream come true to be able to fulfill my career ambition while serving at my alma mater. Having been at MSU for almost 23 years has given me a unique insight to the operations of the university. I can’t wait to get up each morning to get into the office and start working for Mississippi State.”

Gilbert said since the addition of the Executive Vice President title, the scope of the office has broadened. After the first year in the new job with interim associates, Gilbert interviewed and selected two associates to work with him that he said are outstanding — Peter Ryan as associate provost and Julia Hodges as associate vice president.

“There is a constant flow of new issues and challenges into the office on a regular basis,” Gilbert said. “I have a standard set of meetings and interactions that are part of the weekly schedule but we are always responding to and solving problems as they arise. I take it as my responsibility to try to find new ways of addressing issues in a progressive and creative fashion, while being as transparent as possible about the operation of the office.”

Gilbert said it is his goal to do everything possible to advance the status and prestige of the university. Two items of high priority for

Gilbert are the attainment of Association of Research Libraries status for the MSU Library System and the successful sheltering of a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

"I want every student that enters our university to have an optimal chance of being as successful as possible both at MSU and in their career," Gilbert said. "Much of the success of our students is directly related to the quality of our faculty. I am extremely proud of our faculty. Over the past several years we have hired some of the best young faculty in country, coming to us from many prestigious peer and peer-plus universities. Our students and our faculty are truly outstanding."

Gilbert said he and President Keenum are committed to increasing the diversity of the MSU faculty.

"We are quite proud of the fact that our African American student enrollment is the highest of the 1,862 land-grant universities,"

Gilbert said. "We have as a five-year goal to increase our African American faculty members from 4.3 to 7.5 percent."

Faculty salaries are continually a concern. Gilbert and Keenum regularly discuss ways to try to make salaries more competitive.

Gilbert said the same goes for staff salaries.

"We want to be able to attract and retain quality, and so far we have been quite successful but we can't continue that success without constant attention," Gilbert said. "In our goal to increase the retention and graduation rates ... we are committed to developing new approaches to assisting with student success."

Gilbert said MSU has a great set of academic programs for students and he is very proud of the opportunities available.

In 2006, MSU endowed the Honors program and transformed it into the Shackouls Honors College. Since then, MSU hired its first dean, Chris Snyder.

"I look to see changes in the Honor College which will enhance and expand an already outstanding program," Gilbert said. "This is particularly gratifying to me since I was so active as a student in MSU in the Honors Program."

Gilbert recently advocated for a separate Study Abroad Office for MSU and one was established, which has significantly added to the participation rate of MSU students.

"I have seen international experiences change the lives of students, always in a positive way," Gilbert said. "I would like make available to all of our students an international experience. It broadens their horizons and opens up a new world of possibilities. I am particularly pleased that with President Keenum's support, a new International Institute has been formed at MSU. Clearly MSU is moving to have more of a global presence for our students, faculty, staff and alumni."

Gilbert said one of the biggest challenges MSU faces is how to keep up with growing student enrollments. Gilbert said plans are in the works for a new 90,000 square-foot classroom building to address growing classroom space needs. The anticipated location is just north of and adjacent to the YMCA Building.

"It will be a state-of-the-art classroom building that will serve all of the colleges," Gilbert said.

Keenum said Gilbert's experience and leadership abilities have been invaluable in helping advance the mission of the university during difficult economic times.

"The duties of provost and executive vice president are far-reaching, and the challenges associated with our increased enrollment have been many," Keenum said. "Jerry has handled them with great professionalism and skill. He has earned the respect of faculty, administration, staff and students with whom he has worked on these wide-ranging issues. We are fortunate to have Jerry on our leadership team."

Amy Tuck, executive director of campus operations, agrees and said Gilbert has earned "well-deserved respect for his work ethic, his commitment to service, and his forward-looking vision for MSU."

Three years ago, Gilbert was part of a small group at the university, including Lynn Reinschmiedt, Nancy McCarley, Lisa Harris, and Linda Morse, which proposed a first-year reading program or common book for freshmen. As part of the program, the group develops community outreach and university activities in support of incorporating the book in the first year experience.

That program has become the Maroon Edition and each year, MSU has built a Habitat House as part of the program.

"I think that Habitat for Humanity is a great way for the university to be engaged with assistance to the local community," Gilbert said.

Freddie Rasberry, executive director of the Starkville Area Habitat for Humanity, said the organization is blessed to have Gilbert as a strong supporter.

“Dr. Gilbert is a wonderful person, eager to help God’s people in need,” Rasberry said. “His profession and his skills as an engineer bring added benefit to the Starkville Habitat affiliate as well as Habitat volunteers.”

Rasberry said Gilbert’s skills as an educator are quickly identified and beneficial to volunteers as he works with them, seeking to assure each volunteer has a great experience.

“He is very skilled, patient, and an excellent teacher,” Rasberry said. “In a nutshell, Dr. Gilbert is a humble servant willing to take time to patiently work with students to show them the skills required to build a home, giving volunteers the great satisfaction of knowing they not only helped a needy family have a home but also helped provide the family a life changing opportunity.”

Gilbert is a native of Jackson and graduated from Jackson Prep in 1973. He attended MSU as an undergraduate and majored in biological engineering. While an undergraduate, Gilbert was a member of the S.D. Lee Honors Program, which later became the Shackouls Honors College.

He went on to receive his doctorate in biomedical engineering from Duke in 1982. Gilbert and his wife, Leigh, met as graduate students at Duke in biomedical engineering.

He served as a visiting assistant professor of mechanical engineering at N.C. State University for a year and then joined the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1983.

He was on the faculty there for five and a half years as an assistant professor of orthopedic surgery with a second appointment in the biomedical engineering department.

He came to MSU in 1988 as an assistant professor in Agricultural and Biological Engineering.

Along with colleagues at the MSU College of Veterinary Medicine and at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, Gilbert worked on developing a large animal model for postmenopausal osteoporosis in sheep. The group was successful in obtaining a National Institutes of Health Area grant in the early 1990’s to fund the project.

Gilbert was promoted to professor in 1993. He taught courses in biomechanics and materials, as well as engineering design and senior seminar. He was appointed interim department head of agricultural and biological engineering in 1995 and was named permanent department head in 1996.

While department head, he initiated plans to construct a new building for the department and personally led the effort in 2001 to create the master’s of science and doctorate programs in biomedical engineering at MSU.

Gilbert became associate provost at MSU in January of 2004. He served as associate provost until he started his current position in March of 2010.

While in the office as associate provost, Gilbert had the opportunity to work with Peter Rabideau, who was serving as provost.

In 2008, Gilbert was one of four people in the nation to be named a fellow with the Institute of Biological Engineers, but he says his children are his biggest accomplishment.

“Of the things in my life I am most proud of, I would have to say that it is my three children, Peter, Sallie and Caroline,” Gilbert said. “Peter and Sallie are MSU graduates, and Caroline is a junior at MSU. They all have unique talents and will make a significant mark on the world.”

Peter is a doctoral graduate student in computer science at Duke University, while Sallie is an employee of International Paper in Washington D.C.

Gilbert said his parents have had the largest influence on his life in general.

“Both were products of the Great Depression and instilled in me the values of hard work, integrity and respect for others,” Gilbert said.

In his career, the number of influential individuals have been numerous, including his ninth grade English teacher Beatrice Moore, his department head at MSU Bill Fox, his mechanics teacher Z. Warsi and his graduate school advisor Jim McElhaney.

“There have been countless others,” Gilbert said. “In fact, I try to take away something of value from all of the interactions and

relationships I have with people because I think there is a lot to learn from others. I have sometimes surprised students by telling them that professors often learn things from their students, particularly their graduate students.”

His wife, Leigh works in the Central Office of the Starkville School District. When they arrived in Starkville, in 1988 with small children, they became very involved in the public schools of Starkville.

Gilbert and several colleagues, including Jonathan Pote and Tom Cathcart, formed the Starkville Foundation for Public Education in 1989 to help enhance the public schools. He continued to serve on the board until a several years ago and ran the grants program.

He is also a member of the Starkville Area Arts Council and served one term on the SAAC Board of Directors.

The Gilberts are members of Trinity Presbyterian Church, where he has taught preschool and/or first and second grade Sunday School for over 12 years.

For the Gilberts, life in Starkville is “very happy.”

“I say never say ‘never,’ but I am very pleased with my job and living in Starkville,” Gilbert said. “It is my goal to continue to help Dr. Keenum carry out his vision for Mississippi State.”