

Creating Success
NC Community Colleges
Hope • Opportunity • Jobs

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Opening Address

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Thank you for that warm introduction, Linwood. Before I begin, I'd like to take this opportunity to do a bit of introducing myself. This is my family -- my wife, Lisa, and sons, Benjamin and Lucas. Lisa, Benjamin and Lucas, this is my extended family -- the community college family. I'm so proud to be a part of both families and to be connected to the people in this hall tonight.

I cannot think of a group more important to the future of North Carolina than the people I see before me -- the North Carolina Community College family. I thank you for your dedicated service to our students, our communities and our State.

Dr. Powell's introduction told you a few things about me, and many of you know me from my various roles in the North Carolina Community College System. Those of you who know me well know that I don't like to be the center of attention, though I often find myself there, but what I do appreciate is your willingness to let me speak to you today and for the reception after this session. It's very kind of you to take your Sunday to be here and to be so supportive of our System.

My wife Lisa, well, she may also tell you that in addition to not enjoying attention, I also don't always **pay** close attention...for example, Lisa spent some awkward moments in recent days working with friends of ours who had planned a welcoming party for us...tonight...yes...tonight...she SAYS that she told me about it, and I'm sure she's right...but apparently I wasn't paying close attention...

While I may not be the best at being attentive all the time, I'd like to talk with you a bit about paying attention. It seems to me that today's society is rife with extremely complicated issues, issues that require a great deal of attention in a multi-tasking world with an increasingly short attention span. But as a society, we don't have the luxury of not paying close attention anymore-- we must give our concerted attention to the complicated issues facing our nation and State. And in turn, our political leaders must pay attention to the transformational role that community colleges play in the economic issues we all face.

Give me your attention for just a moment. **(VIDEO of people passing a ball around while a "bear" moonwalks through)**

Many of you have seen this video or a similar video before, particularly if you have attended a League of Innovation conference, but it is especially relevant now. Today, the economy is the people passing the ball. We can't take our eyes off of it...it saturates the news, TV, radio, blogs, magazines. Unfortunately, we missed many of the subtle signs -- the bear moonwalking -- that got us here. In my opinion, if you look closely at these vital, yet subtle signals, you see that no one has a more important role than we do in defining North Carolina's future.

For instance, you did not have to be paying close attention to now know that we face an energy crisis. We've been paying \$4 per gallon for gas in recent weeks, and some colleges were closed a few weeks ago because of the shortages that started with Hurricane Ike. That has hit us all hard, and we all know about it. But how many of us realized the significance of an event that happened on Dec. 31, 2007? That's when

Kathleen Casey-Kirschling became the first baby boomer to apply for Social Security. Did you hear the future workforce crisis begin?

Probably not. Oh, it was reported, but how many people were paying attention to what this meant? The year before Kathleen was born in 1945, there were 43 workers for every retiree in the United States, and twenty years from now when it has been projected that the last of the baby boomers, like me, should be ready to retire – although those prospects may have changed in recent weeks – but if the current retirement trends continue, it is projected that there will only be two to three workers for every retiree twenty years from now. Our country, our workforce, and our retirement, depend on those workers being educated and well-paid, and therein lies the vital importance of community colleges over the next ten years. Just to replace those folks expected to leave the workforce would require an approximate 75% increase in our current enrollments.

Future workforce shortages are projected by overwhelming demographic trends, but you don't have to be paying close attention to know that we face a jobs crisis right now. We have a tanking economy; plant closing notices are stacking up; home prices are at five-year lows; and the unemployment numbers reported last week are at five-year highs.

We all know about the job crisis, but do you know that we also face a jobs competition crisis? With the emergence of China, India, Brazil and the former Soviet countries onto the worldwide marketplace, North Carolinians face twice as many workforce competitors as they did twelve years ago when I joined the North Carolina Community College System. North Carolina doesn't just have to battle surrounding states for new jobs. We face worldwide competition with nations like Singapore and Ireland that have built economic strength through investment in education and training.

Consider just a few facts: It is widely assumed that China -- a nation that today exports more in one day than they did in the entire year of 1972 and that holds approximately 1.5 trillion dollars worth of our country's debt – that same China is thought by many to have gained its strength only by low wages and unfair trading practices. But, if you were paying close attention, you would also know that last year, 50 percent of what was **made** in China was for the first time also **designed** in China. Those are highly skilled jobs, not sweat shop labor. If you have seen the recent documentary "2 Million Minutes" you may have seen the stark contrast between how high school students in China, India, and the United States choose to spend their two million minutes of high school.

But the attention and the choices are not just adolescent ones. Has your attention been grabbed by the fact that China plans to increase the percentage of its rapidly growing GDP spent on education from 2.8% to 4% by 2010, while several states -- luckily not North Carolina yet -- are spending more now on incarceration than they are investing in higher education.

You don't have to be paying close attention to know that we are facing a historic financial crisis today in the United States. In fact, you'd have to be on a deserted island not to know about record bank failings, frozen credit markets, and the stock market plummeting to a five-year low.

But did you hear about the daunting education crisis? You would have to be paying close attention to know the following two things: One, that we are only one of 30 free-market OECD countries where our younger workforce has less education than our older workforce and, two, that today's generation of youth is the first in American history to have lower educational attainment than their parents.

The education crisis, the spiraling economy, the future workforce shortages and more are all reason why we **HAVE** to pay close attention. We've got to keep our eye on the ball of the future as well as today. And it is also why North Carolina needs to give its attention to community colleges.

We cannot be the moonwalking bear, only noticed by some. We are the people who provide hope for those overlooked or overwhelmed in this economy. We are the people who provide opportunity for those displaced and underserved in a transitioning State. And we are the people who provide educated citizens for our growing communities, trained workers for North Carolina businesses and job opportunities for North Carolinians. We are 58 colleges, 809,000 students and 14,500 faculty and staff who focus on creating success across our State.

We are the people of the open door, a door we must work harder to keep open to all. When other forms of higher education take pride in their selectivity, we take even greater pride in our philosophy of taking people from where they are – regardless of that starting place – and allowing them to go as far as their dreams, motivation and capacity will carry them.

We give our students access and opportunity, many for the first time in their lives...some for the first time in their families' lives...and with that they earn their own dignity, a sense of value and all-important self-worth.

As a former community college President, I would sometimes go home from work and tell my wife that it had been a community college kind of day.

Each of you have experienced community college days – the days when you see the heroics of a student striving to better his or her life, and better their family's lives, in the face of tremendous sacrifice and barriers. They are the days when you feel so fortunate, not only to be blessed with the things you have been given, but blessed to be a part of an organization that transforms lives of others.

The last day of exams during my last semester as President at Craven Community College was truly a community college day and one I will never forget. On that day, three student heroes approached me in the hallway to tell me what the community college had provided to them.

One was an older student I'll call John. I met John during his first few weeks as a new student when he signed up for one of my monthly student pizza lunches. I don't know if I ever met such an eager student – he had overcome alcoholism and had been away from education for over 20 years. He felt so privileged to have the opportunity to be a community college student. On that last day, John stopped me in the hallway to show me his grades. "Dr. Ralls," he said, faced streaked with tears, "I'm so proud. I made all A's and I'm so happy I haven't been able to stop crying."

The second student was another older student, a woman named Susan. I remembered her well because I happened to be working the registration line when she walked through the doors to register several years earlier. I remembered her so clearly because I have never seen a student so nervous.

Now, you know, we see nervous people all the time, especially students who have put their kids through school, and now it is "their turn." They sit in our parking lots mustering the courage, the heroism, to walk through our doors, and if we give them the slightest reason, they'll turn around and leave, saying, "I should have known it was just not meant to be for me."

Well, Susan was the epitome of one of those anxious older student heroes, and she was as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs when she walked through our doors. But it was wonderful to watch how our staff just embraced her and engulfed her and would not let her leave until she had completed registration, even though her instincts told her to chuck it all and run for the doors.

On my last day, Susan approached me in the hallway to tell me that she had just received her grades and that she would be graduating. "Dr. Ralls," she said, "I just wanted you to know because this community college saved my life."

Those two were more than enough to make it a very special community college day, but as the day was ending, Isaiah tracked me down to tell me that he also had received his grades. Isaiah had passed all of his classes and would be able to return the next semester. Now this was a special day for a student who had struggled academically to make it from semester to semester, but for me, it was extra-special because I had watched Isaiah grow.

He's a wonderful young man who seemed to somehow find trouble or trouble seemed to find Isaiah. He fell into a gang as a boy and was sentenced to the Western Correctional Center in Morganton as a youth, and he found his way to our college after returning home to Eastern North Carolina.

Early on in his first year, he got into trouble, trouble that would have, should have gotten him kicked out. But I still remember John Fonville, the Dean of Students talking to me about it, and saying if we don't give him a second chance, he'll never have another.

So we told him he could stay if he did not participate in the extracurricular activities that seemed to encourage his misbehavior. One day walking across the campus I saw him interacting with one of the clubs so I pulled him out, marched him down to the Dean's office and proceeded to raise my voice to him like I never had to a student before. "Don't you realize we gave you a second chance?" I said. And this very large young man who lived in a group home burst out in tears, rocking back and forth sobbing, saying, "I don't know what to do with myself. I don't mean to get in trouble, but I just seem to, and I have nowhere else to go."

This was on a Friday and that weekend, I tossed and turned and worried to Lisa that I had been too tough on Isaiah. Early the next week, walking through campus, I saw Isaiah with a suit and tie on. So I asked him what was up. He said "I'm going for a job interview today. I realized that this was the first place that ever cared about me so it is time I started caring for myself."

Throughout the next couple of years, Isaiah ran into a different type of troubles – academic troubles – and he dropped out. Once I ran into him at our town's homeless shelter coming through the food line. He seemed so embarrassed, slumped down; he would hardly even look at me.

But he found his way back – to a college that had become more than an educational institution, but had become his home – and he succeeded in his own way. In fact, Isaiah succeeded for all of us this year when we were able to achieve an increase in funding for the Minority Male Mentoring program, because he had the opportunity to tell his story to the legislative leadership and they loved him. And in turn, they appreciated us for what we do to pay attention and give hope and opportunity to the Isaiah's.

And on the last day of my last semester as President, Isaiah capped off my ultimate community college day by tracking me down to thank me for the community college that had given him his chance in life.

Folks, that's what community colleges are all about. We create success for people like Isaiah, Susan, and John, everyday through hope, opportunity and jobs. You know what I mean because you can sometimes even see physical transformation in many of our students – one day they may be slumped over, unable to look us in the eye, but eventually they stand taller, and walk prouder than they ever have before. We give our students access and opportunity -- we give them a pathway -- and they earn their own dignity and find a better way of life.

These jobs, our roles as community college people, have never been more important in our state than they are today. I wish I could tell you that our jobs will become easier than they have been, but I can't because I know they won't.

I wish I could tell you that the badly needed resources we have long been waiting for are right around the corner, but I won't because I am not sure that they are.

But there is one thing that I am very sure about – we are the ones that North Carolina needs right now. We are the ones that thousands of North Carolinians have been waiting for.

Why? Because we are North Carolina's cavalry, and in a North Carolina rocked by economic turmoil, we better strap in tight, because we have to give our jobs, the most important jobs that anyone could have right now, their closest attention.

But as our State's economic cavalry, we also have to have North Carolina's attention. Because, one thing I learned from watching movies as a boy, is that the cavalry needs soldiers and horses to come to anyone's rescue.

To be the world-class community college system that North Carolina needs, we must have great instructors and staff and at least decent technology. But you can't be world-class and expect to retain great instructors when you pay them only 79% of the national average. And you can't pretend to be world-class when you only receive enough money to replace even your current inadequate technology once a decade.

That is why, even in the face of one of the greatest economic crises our state and nation has faced – perhaps because of that crisis – North Carolina has to face this brutal truth – it needs its community colleges to be strong. And to be strong, we need five things: 1) We need to pay you at least the national average which you deserve 2) We need to allow for at least a six-to-seven-year replacement cycle on our technology and equipment 3) We need to expand our health care programs to meet our State's growing healthcare needs. 4)

We must reenergize our technical education programs to supply the workforce our companies demand in a competitive world; and 5) We need to return our job training programs to the level they once were to keep North Carolina's businesses strong.

How will we do this? We need to increase our per student funding by \$1,000 per full time student, and we would like to do this over the next four years...yes, we need an additional \$250 per student per year for four years...North Carolina, are you paying attention to your community colleges?

How can we do this in the face of tough economic times? It's a very valid question. But an equally valid question is how can we NOT be the priority in these economic times? If we are going to be the type of community colleges that North Carolinians expect and need right now – it's going to take soldiers and horses.

And how will we convince our State's leaders that this attention is required? We'll do it together as we tell the community college story. We need you – everyone in the community college family -- to let people know what we do to create success through hope, opportunity and jobs. That is why we, as a community college family, have created a focused budget approach to achieve our basic yet vital goals over what we hope would be the next four years. We've developed a "Creating Success" campaign that we will take to the next Governor, General Assembly members, and the people of North Carolina.

We'll do this no matter what the numbers are on Wall Street or on Jones Street. And in the face of the economic difficulties, we'll do it no matter how long it takes us to get where we need to be. And we'll do this with one goal in mind: making the world's best community college system into a world-class network of 58 colleges from Manteo to Murphy.

And why will we do it? Why will North Carolina's economic cavalry face this uphill battle? Because of Isaiah, because of Susan, because of John, and because of all the community college heroes that you've helped. And, because North Carolina needs our help now more than ever before.

So now more than ever, be proud of being community college people. Stand tall when telling the community college story. Wear your community college role as a badge of honor.

And just to give you a head start, we will be passing out "Creating Success" decals that we hope you will put on your bumpers, in your car window, in your office or in your home. Each time you see it...and each time others see it, you and they will be reminded of what we do. We **are** North Carolina Community Colleges, and we create success through hope, opportunity and jobs.

As community college people, even in the face of our extreme challenges, we are blessed that we are part of something much larger than ourselves. And as Ronald Reagan once said about the Marines, we are also blessed that we do not have to worry about waking up in the morning not knowing what our mission will be.

But now we have to give that mission our closest attention. Because thousands of North Carolinians are going to be waking up not knowing where their next job will be, not knowing if they can find opportunity, not knowing if they can recover their hope. But they will find their way because they have you, the community college people, the people of the open-door, the family who creates success.

I can't tell you how proud I am to be one of you.

Thank you for all you do every day. We are a better college network and a better state because of each of you.

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