

President's Report
State Board of Community Colleges
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Friday, August 21, 2009

Author Henry Miller said, "One's destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things." The late tennis player, Arthur Ashe said, "Success is a journey, not a destination." And that great philosopher, Ferris Bueller, star of the late John Hughes' famous movie, said, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

With last year's record demand and the most challenging budget year in our System's history, we can certainly say that life has moved pretty fast for the North Carolina Community College System. Along our journey, we haven't slowed down often, but the accomplishments of our "Creating Success" legislative campaign and the recent release of our strong performance metrics caused us to "look around" and recognize the achievements of our colleges and our community college family. We have a lot to be proud of.

During yesterday's meetings, you heard a lot about some of those accomplishments including our budget gains in additional weighted funding for healthcare programs, the first weighted funding for our technical and vocational programs, increased equipment funds and recurring enrollment growth. Over the last few months, we've touted the progress in restructured customized training programs that have made us more flexible and responsive. And you've been introduced to accelerated job training through the newly implemented JobsNOW 12-in-6 program that has also provided strategic program integration and new linkages with local Workforce Development Boards.

And as we take a moment to "pop our heads up" from dealing with the crisis du jour, it's important that we take a serious look at some pretty important opportunities that could have a significant impact on our future definition of success.

News reports over the past two weeks have highlighted the “staggering enrollment growth” taking place again this year at the majority of our community colleges. But we can’t be so overwhelmed by the incoming numbers that we lose sight of the real prize – the outgoing numbers -- our May graduation rates. Successful completion of degrees, diplomas, certificates and industry-recognized certifications become increasingly important, I would say urgent, with the emergence of “mid-level” jobs and with the continual decline of quality opportunities for individuals with a high school diploma or less.

In addressing student success, we have to begin with student access. This means we must:

- Give attention to financial aid and minority mentoring.
- Explore even deeper collaborations with the public schools to reach students at a younger age so they see college opportunities and how to reach those opportunities as a key part of their future.
- Increase our focus on the first-year experience. Our data shows we lose a majority of our students during the first year. This will mean additional attention on our college success courses, student orientation, career development, early warning programs and student support services.
- (We must) Sharpen our focus on our Developmental Education programs by increasing summer opportunities, modularizing and developing more computer-based instruction, contextualizing programs with career areas, and collaboratively working with high schools on diagnostic assessment. I think moving the dial on developmental education achievements will be ground zero for us in making real progress in student success.

As we address student success, we must be ever cognizant that success in an increasingly globally competitive environment means vigilant attention to program rigor. To enhance program rigor, we have to:

- Assess our current program offerings to be sure that they are providing both the types and level of education demanded by the employers of today and tomorrow.
- Tackle the dwindling numbers of students in Associate in Science and other STEM areas and redouble our efforts with the university system to further 2+2 opportunities in healthcare, teaching and engineering.
- Pay close attention to our basic skills programs by developing important linkages with developmental programs and continue to promote bridges to our curriculum degree and vocational training programs. Additionally, we must examine the significant number of dropouts of high-school age turning to our basic skills programs as alternatives. Are we truly offering them the best route to long-term success?

It is also time we stepped back and assessed our applied engineering and construction technology programs to rationalize them, “green” the curriculum where appropriate, and look for the benefits that program modularization may offer.

We have complemented our emphasis on biotechnology with advancements in aerospace production and energy efficiency/green technology, but we must continue to push further in all three areas to capitalize on the potential job prospects they hold for our state.

To further our “Creating Success” goal of expanding healthcare programs, we must look beyond funding and deal with an environment where student capacity may be limited by available clinical sites. We must look toward new technology solutions to expand capacity and to provide richer career development and instructional environments.

Finally, we must continue our emphasis on system simplification, because in a world with increasing demand and declining resources, we must enable our college faculty and staff to be ever nimble. That means:

- More data-driven decisions, requiring us to address, refine and in some cases fix the tools our colleges have available to them.
- Continually refining our processes. Perhaps it is time for us to step up and really address the program approval process that we have been kicking around for a number of years.

Whew...it's a long list, isn't it? And it's one that will require a lot of hard work from many people, including you our State Board members. But I hope you share my exhilaration at the possibilities and the potential – even in an environment with unparalleled student enrollments and declining resources. Perhaps we should take a page from our adult age students who share a unique perspective about lifelong learning – the more you learn, the more you discover there is to learn, and that is what makes life so interesting and beautiful.

Consider Matt Lemens from Southwestern Community College who lost his job as a cloth lifter at a textile plant when the plant closed. His life was thrown into chaos, but the opportunity to pursue his dream of higher education became a reality. And Matt's view of learning: "The faculty showed me that when education is the rising tide that carries all who participate to a level beyond their assumed potential, a community is created that is wiser and stronger as a result."

It would be easy for us to grow weary of the daily crisis, the continuing financial challenge, and the wave of student demand that sometimes appears to be overwhelming our System. But that is not the spirit I encountered recently at the opening days at Central Piedmont Community College and at Haywood Community College. Nor is it the excitement Governor Perdue saw when she visited Surry Community College Tuesday on its opening day. Our community college folks are excited about the role they are playing at this critical point in our state's history. They are excited about the continuing opportunity to go from where we are today as a System, to as Dallas Herring might have said, "as far as our capacities may carry us." Or as Matt Lemens, our student philosopher from Southwestern, might say, "Growing a community that is wiser and stronger."

I share that excitement, and I know you do too. I look forward to building on that in as we begin another new academic year in the community college system.

2009-10 is a journey filled with potential.