

President's Report
State Board of Community Colleges

Dr. R. Scott Ralls

Friday, July 17, 2009

Today, the NC Community College System made history with the swearing in of nine members to our State Board. Never before in the nearly 50 year history of our system or in the 28 years since we've had a State Board have nine members come in as one class. Welcome to our new members and thank you in advance for the leadership and insight you will provide to our 58 community colleges during your terms. You will be providing leadership to our system at a time when I believe that community colleges are more important to North Carolina's economic prosperity than at any time in our history.

And you are not new to our state's community colleges. Some of you are being reappointed and we appreciate your continued service. Of the new members, some have served as presidents, chairs of trustees and trustees for many years. You've been in the trenches and on the front lines so today may also be historic for the breadth of service and involvement we add to our already excellent State Board.

With that experience it will likely come as no surprise to you that our colleges – through the darkest of economic clouds – continue to strive for excellence as well. For those who heard Keith Brown's summary of our performance measures yesterday, you know that our colleges as a whole increased their achievement of our success standards on 7 out of 8 core indicators from last year's report. Now, these data points were taken during the 2007-08 academic year, just before the real eye of the economic storm hit us, but it did include the first six months of this recession which the experts now tell us began in December 2007. I bet our college faculty, presidents and trustees could have told them when it began long before the recession was officially announced in Dec. 2008.

It is also worth noting that these successful achievements come a year after raising our system's standards prior to the 2008 report. We all appreciated having large numbers of colleges performing at a standard that labeled them as "superior," but we also knew that to maintain the level of excellence needed to compete in today's global economy, our standards would have to continuously be increased. Last year, we had only seven colleges make the newly defined "Exceptional Institutional Performance" measure. This year, we had 11, including one college that had never made the top echelon before, Pitt Community College.

In any year that you get 18 percent of your colleges meeting or exceeding all eight of your core metrics and achieving three additional measures in order to be deemed exceptional, that's pretty doggone good. But when they do it while facing exploding enrollments and the beginnings of economic uncertainty, well, it is extraordinary. In addition to Pitt Community College, I'd like to single out the other 10 who reached the top achievement: Alamance, Asheville-Buncombe, Blue Ridge, Central Piedmont, Coastal Carolina, McDowell, Mitchell, Randolph, Wake and Wilkes.

But I also don't want to lose sight of the outstanding accomplishments of all 58 colleges on the performance standards. This data, again taken from the 2007-08 academic year, confirms what we've known all along: our community colleges do a great job of preparing students for workplace success, college readiness and college transfer.

In workplace readiness, 45 colleges met our system's standard of an 80 percent passing rate on 23 different licensure and certification exams for first time test takers. In 2007-08 that meant 9,007 out of 10,490 students succeeded on their first try on these exams which are a standardized measure of workforce readiness... and some of these are in the high-demand areas such as healthcare and technical skills. But Terry Harris already knows how well our colleges prepare their students. After 25 years, Terry lost his job in the telecommunications sector and turned to Durham Tech to receive training as an optician. He even got his wife to join him in the program, and now they both have careers in this industry.

In college readiness, the success of 44 colleges in meeting or exceeding the system standard of having 83 percent of alums now in four-year institutions produce a 2.0 or better after two semesters is testament to the strong educational foundation we provide thousands of college transfer students each year. Additionally, we had 30 colleges that met or exceeded the 87 percent success rate of students who began in, rather than transferred into, the UNC System. That's a first for us and again, reflects the quality work our faculty and staff are doing everyday for our students. Russell Woolard is living proof of our college transfers' success. After attending Beaufort's college transfer program, Russell went on to earn a degree in political science from East Carolina University. He is now an award-winning journalist who has reported on many world events including the aftermath of September 11th terrorist attacks.

As if those two highlights were not enough, here's one measure that I think is especially important, particularly as we move forward in developmental education: 57 colleges combined for a system average of 88 percent of students who were doing well in college-level courses after having started at the developmental level. These are students who began in our courses designed to help them get a lift up, to better prepare them for college success. And of those students who took college-level courses, the system success rate is reaching toward 90 percent. Why is this especially critical? Currently, when we have 57 percent of recent high-school graduates entering into these programs at our colleges, that achievement is a fundamental prerequisite to student success.

One of our greatest examples of student success in this area is April Williamson. April was a high school dropout and young mother who desperately wanted a career. After completing the GED program, she continued her education at Montgomery Community College, earning an Associate in Science Degree. She transferred to Campbell University and graduated Summa Cum Laude and then went on to Campbell's School of Law, graduating in the top ten in her class. Now a successful attorney, April has gone about as far as anyone can get from dropping out of high school.

But I don't want you to think we've got it all figured out. We've still got to find a way to partner with K-12 to reduce the number of students dropping out and the number taking developmental courses. We've got to find a way to retain more of them and have more of them experience college-level success. We want to look for ways to increase student success and continue to make our programs stronger while giving more students a chance at a better quality of life through education whether that be one-year, two-year or beyond.

And why do our colleges keep striving for excellence in the face of looming budget cuts and skyrocketing enrollments? Why do our students keep raising the bar of success? Why will you give so generously of your time, wisdom and skills to help lead our 58 colleges out of the Great Recession into the next economic and educational boom as community colleges serve as our state's most travelled road to recovery?

I'll turn to our country's Second Lady, Dr. Jill Biden, a community college instructor, for that answer. In an address she delivered on July 6th, she said, "I am grateful for the opportunity to spread the word about the valuable contribution community colleges make in the United States. But I am not a politician. I am not a researcher or an education policy expert....I am a teacher. My experience with community colleges is personal. People sometimes ask why I choose to teach at a community college. The answer is simple: It's the students."

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