

President's Report
State Board of Community Colleges
Dr. R. Scott Ralls
Friday, April 16, 2010

You all know me well enough by now to know that I love student stories. And I'm not alone. Each of us loves the remarkable stories of our students -- our "heroes in the hallways" who better their lives, their family's opportunities, and our communities by their personal sacrifice. They succeed for all of us many in spite of self-doubt, significant financial and personal and family sacrifice, and previous lack of education opportunity. And when they succeed and we witness their stories, we are inspired and energized. Witnessing their success fuels our passion.

This week we had the opportunity to be up close and personal with many of these stories, as some of our best "heroes in the hallways" gathered for our outstanding Excellence Event on Wednesday.

The heroes that night included our 58 Academic Excellence Award recipients as well as the Robert Scott Leadership Award and the first ever Dallas Herring Achievement Award winners. For all 500-plus in the McKimmon Center on Wednesday night, I believe Antonio McNeill's story of going through fire, Brian Long's story of going from gang member to successful college graduate, and Chastity Holt's amazing story of how educational perseverance through homelessness impacted not only her own life transformation but that of the brother she helped raise -- well, those stories left a mark...and stirred a passion in each person to do more. The

faces of those students, the depths of their courage and the size of their hearts will stay with us a long time. And don't think I won't seize every opportunity possible to tell those stories to others. These are truly remarkable people who make us all proud.

But you know behind every great student story is one or more remarkable teacher.

And on Wednesday night, the powerful comments by Excellence in Teaching Award recipient, Robin Harris of College of The Albemarle, particularly struck me. Her words were incredibly meaningful, but what was especially memorable was the passion she demonstrated. In fact, she specifically pointed to the vital role that passion plays in the professional lives of community college instructors. Robin said something that I agree with wholeheartedly. She said that she believes community college instructors are perhaps unique in the zeal that they feel for teaching and for the success of their students. Robin is a pretty good expert on this subject as she has been both a community college student and a community college instructor, all at the College of The Albemarle.

The SuccessNC Listening Tours that Dr. Tom Houlihan just referenced and that several of you have participated in have reminded me that, while fostering innovation and exploring strategies are critical, we can't lose sight of the fact that the most fundamental component of student success is the role of teachers...and not just any teachers but passionate teachers like Robin Harris and others we've encountered on our visits around the state.

Two weeks ago, I saw the power of that same passion at Mayland Community College embodied in a math teacher named Larry Shook. Larry described the supplemental instruction programs that are producing tremendous student success results at Mayland. But in reality, it is not the program producing the results, but rather the passion and dedication of teachers to teach and tutor, not just when they are in the classroom.

I also saw the power of passion at Tri-County Community College when Gary Westmoreland, the welding instructor, announced he did not want to present a Powerpoint on the success of his welding students but rather he wanted to present some of their paychecks. And that is what he literally did. He presented us with copies of their recent paychecks.

Gary felt that they did the loudest and best talking for his program...and he was right. With students working around the world and some bringing home six-figure incomes back to Tri-County's communities, you couldn't argue with his logic. Driven by Gary's passion and expertise, the welding program at Tri-County Community College has grown to become more than an academic program, but an economic engine in the far western end of our state. There, students gain sophisticated welding skills and travel around the world for jobs as they send money back home to support their families in the mountains. And Gary is not just a source of instruction for his current students, but a bedrock for his former students, many who call him when the bouts of homesickness kick in.

And our staff person of the year, James Kelley from Fayetteville Technical Community College, reminded us Wednesday night that community college teachers are not just faculty members and instructors. Teaching doesn't just occur in classrooms and labs, but in counseling offices, hallways, ball fields and business offices as students learn and develop, not just by their formal instruction, but with their interactions with everyone at the college who influence their development.

When I was a community college president at Craven Community College, one of our very best "teachers" was a maintenance worker named Ed Davis who positively impacted students and staff through his daily interactions. Ed provided valuable informal instruction to all of us, although he may not have considered himself a teacher. We thought so much of him, that when he retired we named our new maintenance building for him.

Our valued teachers that are the secret to student success are certainly our faculty, but they are also staff, administrators and others who may differ in roles but share the common trait of passion. In some cases, our great student teachers are not on college payrolls – they are trustees, partners, state board members and volunteers.

One of those passionate partner teachers who presented at the Listening Tour at Tri-County Community College in Murphy was the principal of the Early College, Alissa Cheek. She bubbled with pride as she talked of the 83 students at the school, 53 being first-generation college students. And there deep in the mountains, she noted that of the 23 students graduating

from high school in four years, 13 will also receive their associate degree from Tri-County Community College and 12 of those 13 have been accepted to four-year colleges. The Early College was presented as a key Tri-County strategy to foster student success, but the pride Alissa displayed was much more personal than the fulfillment of a well-designed strategy. Her passion was evident when her eyes glistened with tears as she described one soon-to-be graduate, whose desperate parents had visited her when he was a middle-schooler and they were distraught over the future of their son who had missed 52 days of school as an eighth grader. Recently those same parents had visited her to tell her that after three years of perfect school attendance and a bright future ahead, the experience had not only changed their son's life but had changed their family's lives. So often she noted, the accomplishments that take place at our colleges is so much more than just student success. It's about redirecting lives positively and for a lifetime – and in many cases those student successes impact far beyond the student alone.

We have now completed almost a third of our listening tours, and one of the lessons for me from these visits, that was reinforced again to me Wednesday night, is that programs and policies are important to student success, but it is passionate teachers – those in the classroom, in the hallways, in our board rooms, in the administrative offices and on the sidewalks – it is those teachers that truly make the difference and are the hallmark of our community colleges' success.