

## **President's Report**

Dr. R. Scott Ralls

State Board of Community Colleges

*Friday, May 15, 2009*

May is my one year anniversary in this position, and this time last year, in just my second week on the job, we found ourselves embroiled in controversy. I believe in my first President's report I referenced the Dickens quote, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Well, given the current budget scenarios, some may suggest that I was only half right at the time.

Last week we learned that April 15<sup>th</sup> tax returns were 40 percent less this year than last, and estimates are that to balance the budget next year would require \$1.5 billion more in cuts and/or revenues than the budgets recommended by the Governor or recently passed by the Senate.

But the truth is that no matter how dark the budget clouds may look, May is always the best of times in the North Carolina Community College System. May is the month we celebrate student accomplishment at our graduation ceremonies, and today I am calling in from Dobson because I spoke at the Surry Community College graduation last night. Later today I will travel to Hendersonville for the Blue Ridge graduation tonight, and finish up at Wake Tech for graduation on Sunday. I would give anything not to be speaking at the Wake Tech graduation because unfortunately, I am substituting for the late Senator Vernon Malone, who was such a champion for education and students and was a real friend of our System. He is greatly missed by us all.

My travels over the past month have been highlighted by participation in several local college Academic Excellence Awards, which have been held to compensate for the State ceremony that we were forced to cancel this year due to the budget restrictions. I would defy anyone to feel anything but optimistic about the spirit of our state and the role of our System in dealing with tough times after attending one of these ceremonies.

In Morehead City, I met a mother of six who enrolled at Carteret Community College after 15 years away from education when her husband left her to fend for her own and her family's way. She is one of our 2009 graduates with a high GPA in a tough Associate in Science discipline and is awaiting word of admission to a nursing program. A highlight for me was seeing the pride in her young sons' eyes to have a mother who was a very deserving academic award recipient.

At Rockingham, I met a father of two young girls who had been laid-off from a textile job, and with the encouragement of his wife, a public school teacher, he entered a teacher preparation program at Richmond Community College. His studies came while working other jobs, but now he is graduating with a 4.0 and planning for his transfer to a university. He is on his way to becoming a North Carolina public school teacher, and there are some lucky students down the road who will benefit from his hard work and dedication.

At Roxboro, I heard an optimistic woman – a double lay-off victim – who enrolled at Piedmont Community College when she was first laid-off, found another job and has since been laid-off again, say “I came to Piedmont Community College with lots of self doubts, and I leave with hope and optimism.” And as I was leaving Roxboro that night, Piedmont’s remarkable community college student government president, a 52-year-old man with multiple sclerosis stopped me because he wanted me to know how much the community college had meant to him and the impact that community colleges have in students’ lives.

I know I tend to go on and on about these student stories, and as my wife used to say if she didn’t trust me and know me, it would be hard for her to believe they are really true. But our classrooms and hallways are absolutely full of heroes, and May is the month when those heroic stories really emerge.

And in a time when the daily challenges we face weigh us down, their stories continuously serve as inspiration. In my graduation speeches, I have been speaking about the need for the attribute of hardiness, and using student stories to illustrate what I mean.

So I will conclude by sharing one of my recent favorite “Creating Success” stories, the story of Lori Pacheco whose challenging life started by following her alcoholic mother from place to place, frequently sleeping in buses and bars. As an adult, Lori found herself a rape victim, depressed, homeless and living in a women’s shelter in southeastern North Carolina where she still resides. And this week, Lori is one of our newest North Carolina community college graduates

She is graduating with straight A’s from the paralegal associate’s degree program at Cape Fear Community College and was one of two North Carolina students recently named to the prestigious USA Today Community College Academic Team. But here’s the really impressive part -- the impact she is having on others -- six of the twelve women who share the shelter where Lorie still lives are signed up for classes at Cape Fear Community College next semester.

Now when we use the phrase “Creating Success” that’s exactly what we are talking about, and that is why in my mind May is “Creating Success” month in the community college system. Regardless of whatever other circumstances our System may face, May is always the best of times.