

President's Report
State Board of Community Colleges
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College completion, as you know, is a big issue right now. It's being discussed across our state and nation and around the world. There is study after study being conducted on how to raise completion rates, assess programs and encourage retention. A quick Google search for college completion facts brings up more than 16 million results that include names like the Chronicle for Higher Education, the National Center for Education Statistics, President Obama, the American Association of Community Colleges and a myriad of international sites.

Many issues are driving this intense focus on finding ways to identify, measure and raise college student success, but none more than the fact that the United States is now ranked 12th internationally in college completion rates and graduation rates for young adults, when we held the top spot only a decade ago.

But one of the considerations that gets left out in the hand-wringing is the fact that the United States has an education innovation – community colleges – that allow adults to obtain diplomas, certificates and degrees long beyond the traditional college years. While we should be rightly concerned about college completion among young adults, we should also take some solace that adults in the United States have greater opportunity to obtain education and degrees beyond the traditional ages because of the uniquely American education innovation of community colleges.

One reason they can accomplish these academic successes while working and raising a family is distance learning. And distance learning is nearly as much of a hot topic as college completion. Which is no doubt why 38 million results come up when “college completion online” undergoes the same Google search.

When the News and Observer interviewed 34-year-old Justin Worsley, a Wake Tech distance learning student who has a job and three children, he said in a story published this week that online classes were the "only option" for him.

"It really works out great," Worsley said, "because I can do work on my schedule rather than scheduling my life around my classes."

North Carolinians want educational opportunity, but they want and require it when it fits their schedule, their lives and their needs. That's because less than 20 percent of undergraduate students today are traditional, full-time residential students that do not work. Many more college students work and go to school, and the majority of community college students consider themselves "workers who study."

For older working students with families, distance learning opportunities open the possibility of quality, comprehensive, flexible education. They are able to reach their goals on campus, online and, in some cases, totally online.

Yesterday, during our Issues Luncheon expertly delivered by Sandra Williams and our great team, you heard the background and the numbers. All colleges, all age groups and many students are demanding more, high-quality distance learning to round out the educational offerings of our system. Wake Tech's President Steve Scott says their enrollment in online courses has tripled over the last five years, and across our 58 colleges, online education accounts for 20 percent of all course enrollments in degree programs.

While we still have much to do in distance learning, we also have to give ourselves a quick pat on the back. The proactive measures taken by the NC Community College System in laying the groundwork over the past twelve years for distance course delivery has proven to be a wise and timely investment. The ability to collaboratively develop resources, reduce duplication of costs, and provide a quality standard for online courses, coupled with the broadband connectivity for efficient delivery has allowed the system to meet the unprecedented demand for e-learning.

For many of our students, particularly in some of our more geographically isolated areas, distance learning is the only way they could become college completers.

Surry County has at least one more elementary school teacher because of the online courses that Beth Payne took: “Taking online courses as part of my studies has really made going to school convenient for me,” said Beth. “I can work on homework while my kid is asleep or at night. The online courses are flexible with my schedule, and I like that.”

Another community college alum, Jessica Powell, who took online classes at both Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute and Surry Community College, completed her Associate in Arts degree before transferring to Appalachian State University. “Working full-time and juggling family responsibilities do not leave much free time for going to a traditional classroom. I took classes online which fit into my schedule, at home and at work. It also saved me time from traveling back and forth to school. Online classes provided the avenue for earning my degree as well as helping me to achieve my personal and career goals.”

And then there’s Irene Varney who is taking online classes at Guilford Technical Community College: “With working full-time and raising young children, I knew that I would never be able to attend regular college classes. Before I knew it, I was doing class work each night in my pajamas while my children slept. I was also able to keep my job because my employers saw potential in my hard work and new skills. The GTCC eLearning program makes it possible for young mothers, like me, to have it all.”

As we heard yesterday, it is important to understand that distance learning is not a by-product of education although distance learning concepts and resources can be successfully added to improve traditional courses. No, this distance learning I’m referring to is a form and mindset of education that has meant the degree completion difference to many students like Irene, Jessica and Beth.

And as with almost all our programs and educational initiatives, this one does not occur in a vacuum. It requires partnerships across a broad spectrum, including the

Department of Public Instruction, the UNC System and the e-Learning Commission chaired by Lt. Governor Dalton. And it requires the infrastructure to make it work with one of the most important components being connectivity and the broadband needed to make the connectivity make sense. Most recently, distance education has demanded and generously received the backing of two organizations that will literally form the backbone of distance learning and workforce development across our state.

I'm pleased to introduce the leaders of these two partners: Joe Fredosso, President and CEO of MCNC, and Dan Gerlach, President of the Golden LEAF Foundation. I'd like to give them both an opportunity to say a few words about some recent, exciting news, but before I recognize them, let me give you a few facts about their support of our colleges related to distance learning.

In January 2010, MCNC, a non-profit foundation supporting and advancing the technology needed for North Carolina's K-20 education community, received \$28 million from the ARRA (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) Broadband Recovery initiative known as BTOP (Back to the Top). MCNC raised an additional \$11.7 million in matching funds to bring the total project to \$40 million to bring 480 miles of new fiber to 37 southeastern and western NC counties.

In April 2010, Golden LEAF, another non-profit that has so greatly supported equipment needs, educational programs, and scholarship opportunities for students across our system since its inception in 1999, awarded \$24 million to MCNC to allow them to pursue a second BTOP grant. This \$24 million will help match \$78 million in ARRA funds to provide a total project of \$111 million to install 1,448 miles of new fiber through 69 NC counties in the northeastern, northwestern, north central and south central part of our state. And just this week, Governor Perdue announced that MCNC was awarded the funding.

Joe and Dan have not only been leaders of the organizations that have made these opportunities possible, they are visionary drivers whose leadership and collaboration on BTOP will help us take opportunity through distance learning to a whole new level. I would like to ask Joe and Dan to come forward so that we may

appropriately recognize them, and perhaps to briefly describe how BTOP will enable us to further create success through our community colleges.

These partnerships and specifically the Back to the Top efforts allow us to reach students and for students to reach their educational goals that were often beyond their grasp. Why? Because, for some of our students, the 30 miles to a community college might as well be 3,000. Transportation, child care, work schedules, family responsibilities are often the time and resource barriers that can't always be overcome by simple desire. Sometimes it requires a different way of thinking...a different way of presenting...of learning...of meeting the needs of North Carolina...of partnering together.

Distance learning and the work of our partners like MCNC and Golden LEAF allow North Carolinians to grab hold of educational possibilities and hold on until they reach their dreams. Some may take a certificate or diploma and go directly into the workforce while others may continue down an educational pathway and receive bachelor, master's or higher degrees – and I would note that I am very excited about the direction of our collaborative SuccessNC initiatives with our UNC System partners that you will hear more about in the future to bring new seamless e-learning opportunities to our students.

This type of educational learning is not without bumps...nor without detractors...but then success rarely comes easy.

NC Community Colleges are creating success through hope, opportunity and jobs on campuses, in the classrooms, in family living rooms, and at kitchen tables late at night because of a big dose of innovation, ingenuity, leadership, collaboration and partnerships that allow us to expand our reach virtually and literally into nearly all North Carolina's communities and homes.