

**President's Report**  
**State Board of Community Colleges**  
Friday, October 15, 2010  
***Dr. R. Scott Ralls***

It was perhaps the finest hour in the 109-year history of American community colleges, as reported by *The Washington Post*, and I was privileged to be in attendance last Tuesday (October 5) to witness it and proudly represent the North Carolina Community College System.

The first-ever White House Summit on Community Colleges was much more than a celebration of “the unsung heroes of America’s education system,” as President Obama referred to us, but was more a focus on and discussion of the strategic importance of community colleges in America’s long-term economic prosperity.

During the historic day, there were several things that were particularly notable and surprising to me. The first was that they allowed 50 or so of us presidents, students, and faculty who had arrived early after a breakfast at the American Association of Community Colleges, to freely wander from room to room in the official portion of the White House. While I’m sure someone was watching over us, I worried that in our exuberance, we might break some treasured national artifact and ruin the moment community college folks had worked 109 years to achieve.

The second notable thing to me was the dedication and sincerity of Dr. Jill Biden, the chair of the event, who interacted with the students and other participants with a passion that you would expect from a community college English instructor but with much more passion than you might expect from the Second Lady performing an official function. No, this wasn’t just a check-off in her agenda as Second Lady of the United States, but rather was a notable milestone in what is clearly a personal agenda for someone who is well entrenched in the community college movement. Her impact was evident in the comments of the Vice President who told us later that day that he had heard a moving community college student story from his wife on a weekly basis for seventeen years. It

seems that Dr. Biden also experiences the “community college days” and “heroes in the hallways” that we have often talked about in our conversations together.

The third notable observation for me was the comments by the President, who speaks with a command that exceeds anyone I have ever heard and who clearly sees community colleges as an economic imperative. If we are out educated as a country, he said, we will be out competed, so community colleges have not only moved to a central position in national educational goals but also national competitive goals.

And as we broke out for work sessions in the afternoon, moderated by top national leaders that included Melinda Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, I noted how the work we are doing and the strengths of our system are so well aligned with the national areas of emphasis.

I was assigned to the Business and Industry Collaboration working session, probably because of our colleges’ well known strengths in partnering with the business community to support economic and workforce development. But North Carolina could have just as easily been a model for work in the other sessions as well. For example, there was a session on community college support for military and dependents, which was attended by Pamela Baldwin, a graduate of Craven Community College. As the nation’s most military friendly state, North Carolina is unique for our support in providing in-state tuition to active duty military and their dependents. We might have been the focus in the discussion on financial aid as we have made great strides in the past year to simplify state-based aid, which you heard about on Wednesday, to ensure that aid follows the student across institutions. In the session on partnerships dedicated to moving students to the baccalaureate, our articulation agreements and collaboration with public and private universities would have been envied. Additionally, the work you are leading through the SuccessNC initiative might have been featured in the sessions on College Completion and Community Colleges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as exemplified by the past two days of conversations and presentations. SuccessNC

is clearly in the sweet spot of what national leaders want to see from community colleges.

But the proof is in the pudding, or the product, if you will, and one of the most notable things for me was how well our System was represented by our former students.

As I previously mentioned, one was Pamela Baldwin, one of the six Phi Theta Kappa students selected to participate. I really enjoyed getting to know Pamela and catching up on all my friends and former colleagues at Craven, but I was especially proud of how she and the other five students in attendance represented community colleges. Pamela's story is a classic community college success story, one that is unique but not necessarily uncommon for the many military dependents who attend our colleges. Her initial academic journey was marked by a series of starts and stops, prior to meeting her husband, Shea, a U.S. Navy Corpsman now stationed at Cherry Point. In June 2010, many years after her first start in college and several duty stations later, Pamela completed her accounting degree with a 4.0 grade point average while serving as an academic tutor.

And when I participated in the Business and Industry session, attended by mostly business and organizational leader participants from around the country, I sat beside one of two CEOs who were former community college students, and coincidentally, my neighbor was an alumnus of Durham Tech. After graduating from Durham Tech with a Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship, Aaron Fulkerson moved onto the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before becoming an adjunct instructor at Durham Tech and then being employed by Microsoft in their Advanced Strategies and Policies division. Today, he is the co-founder and CEO of MindTouch, a popular open source business application provider, based in San Diego. During the session, my economic developer instincts kicked in, and I tried to recruit him back to North Carolina. But he said, while that probably won't happen with his roots well established in California, he noted he will continue to return often to recruit our students. That speaks volumes about his experience

and the value he places on the work of our colleges and the caliber of our students.

To describe the take away I had from the first-ever White House Summit on Community Colleges, I want to use as a metaphor a student story that happened just this week during our memorable visit here to Blue Ridge Community College. It seems that after our wonderful listening tour stop here on Wednesday morning, Randy Whitfield, our Associate Vice President for College and Career Readiness, walked back to her car with college employee, Susan Jones, and found that her battery was dead. Blue Ridge student, Justin Creasman, walked up and offered his assistance by cleaning the corrosion off the battery terminals using a ball point pen and wiping it away with his nice clean jacket. Then student Laura Tendroek drove by and asked if a jump start was needed. She pulled out her jumper cables and offered her assistance, even though it made her a little late for class. And another passerby, student Allen Bice, offered his expertise with the jumper cables. It seems the thought of simply walking or driving by and not helping had never entered the minds of these three students.

With the students' assistance, Randy's car started, and she made it to a nearby a service station where she learned that Justin's original diagnosis was indeed correct: the problem was the corrosion on her battery and not the alternator as Randy feared. Soon her car's battery was recharged and thanks to the students, she was on her way back to Raleigh.

The lesson from this story is the same message I heard loud and clear from President Obama at the White House Summit on Community Colleges last week. If we are going to get America's economic engine restarted, it's going to depend on community college students.