

President's Report

State Board of Community Colleges

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As we continue to define and refine our strategic focus on student success, there are two very important events I want to highlight for their impact on success, access and program quality.

One of those events will take place tomorrow on community college campuses and other sites throughout North Carolina – FAFSA Day. It may not have the allure of Valentine's Day, and as far as I know, there are no Hallmark cards to commemorate FAFSA Day -- yet. But in our world and the world of aspiring students and their families, FAFSA Day is one of the most anticipated days of the year.

After already working a long week, community college financial aid counselors and other staff will venture back to community college campuses tomorrow morning to assist students and parents in completing the FAFSA – the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. FAFSA Day events and assistance will not only take place at community colleges, but also at universities, high schools and branches of the State Employees Credit Union, where trained counselors will assist many students and families in taking an important first step to accessing higher education, filling out the federal financial aid forms.

The recurrence of FAFSA Day provides the opportunity for us to thank some of the hardest working members of our community college family, our financial aid counselors. As our enrollment has grown by 25 percent over the past three years, and the financial struggles and needs of our students have also grown, the lines of students outside our financial aid counselors' offices have grown exponentially. Frequently in my travels, I hear the stories of counselors staying late into the evenings to assist students, only to arrive early the next morning to be greeted by a line outside their door.

Programs to provide need-based financial aid to deserving students, and the counselors who assist them, are vital to our student success efforts, and I believe they are making a difference. According to data from North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, since 2006-07, the number of students attending or applying to North Carolina's community colleges who fill out the FAFSA form has increased by 76 percent – hence a large part of the workload increase for our financial aid counselors. And through financial aid, access to higher education for students who would not otherwise have such opportunities becomes feasible. North Carolina has recently been the second fastest-growing state in the nation for the increase in the college-going rate of low-income students.

We should take pride in that progress, but we should also be cautious of the combined impact of increasing tuition rates with stagnant and potentially declining state need-based financial aid opportunities. During the past five years, our tuition rates have increased by 43 percent while the total state investment in grant and scholarship programs for community college students has remained constant at \$14 million. Today, our community college students account for almost half of all undergraduates in the state but receive only 15 percent of state-based financial aid, according to a recent Budget and Tax Center report.

As we face an additional budget deficit this year, further tuition increases will likely be necessary to keep our “doors of opportunity” open and help finance the surge in demand we continue to face. And we will do so at a time when the State’s financial problems also reduce the prospects for student aid. As the State Treasurer and others have made us aware, we have for several years been eating into the principal of the Escheats Fund that is a major source of our state-based aid programs – truly eating our seed corn if you will – and at the same time, budget proposals from Washington suggest the possibility of reductions in Pell Grant funding.

Many of our colleges continue to wrestle with the notion of direct lending, fearful for our students with respect to the significant debt they see them accumulating, but also aware that the average cost of attendance, which now stands at approximately \$16,000 a year, is too much for some students without access to loans. These balances are difficult for all of us at this period in our history, and as we strive to strike the right balance, it will be important for us to remember Dallas Herring’s reminder that the “golden door” to freedom and prosperity in our country rests at the entrance to our classrooms. The first step through that door requires both access to an instructional infrastructure that can provide education and training consistent with 21st century work requirements, and as the students we heard from yesterday suggested, access to the financial aid opportunities that make the opportunity of higher education a reality for many.

And as a college credential becomes increasingly important to the job opportunities our citizens will have – whether that credential be a welding certification, an Associate in Science or a Ph.D. – it is important for all of us to remember the wisdom of this Board in defining our student success agenda to include a focus on access. Our goal with SuccessNC is not to just increase the percentage of students who successfully complete a credential or degree, but the number of students who attain certification, certificate, diploma or degree. That goal will require our continued diligence on student access.

But as we all know, access is only a part of the student success equation. Retaining our students in rigorous, quality programs that meet future workplace and further education requirements is a key part of the student success equation. That is why I want you to know

about an important meeting that took place since our last Board meeting. In fact, I think it is one of the most important meetings that has taken place in our System in many years.

On February 3rd at the Friday Center in Chapel Hill, 170 community college math faculty, developmental educators, college chief academic officers and guests from our education partners gathered to discuss and plan for our significant math redesign initiative. The meeting entitled *Rethinking Developmental Math: A Convening for NCCCS Math Faculty* wasn't just any meeting. It was a planning event that I think will go down as one of the seminal happenings in our student success efforts. The participants heard from national experts, representatives from colleges and system pacesetter programs in Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, and they collaboratively worked to collectively discuss and plan next steps. In fact, I heard that many of the engaged discussions continued way past the scheduled 4 p.m. adjournment.

As you know, this math focus has grown out of our Developmental Education Initiative, which I have sometimes referred to as "ground zero" of our SuccessNC focus. And if developmental education is "ground zero," we have collectively determined that developmental math and its connection and integration with our gatekeeper curriculum math courses is the most important first step.

To address these issues, we have to pay attention to the math competencies of students when they enter and when they leave us. In fact, data indicates that 52 percent of a recent high school class that came to community colleges started in developmental math, and approximately half of those students began at pre-algebra levels. And, of the 54,000 community college students from the 2007-2008 year who successfully transferred to four-year colleges and universities, only 47 percent completed a college math course when they were with us.

Very importantly, I believe, we have to give concerted attention to the math instruction that takes place on our campuses. That is why through this initiative, faculty are leading discussions about the integration and contextualization of developmental math, about the role and importance of modularized instruction and lab-based opportunities, and about the type of math track opportunities that we provide to our students. I believe the fruits of these faculty-led efforts will be fundamental to our SuccessNC goals.

As you've obviously realized by now, I like to conclude my President's Reports with community college student stories, and the story I will tell is that of one of the participants at our math redesign convening. He grew up in California, the son of immigrants, and like so many of our students was full of capability but low on economic opportunity. His engagement with a community college began, not as a student, but as an employee where he worked as groundskeeper.

While there he got noticed by one of the math faculty who invited him to take his class. Going the extra mile, as is so common for community college faculty, the instructor announced to the students of this particular math class, which met in the middle of the afternoon, that they were invited to bring their lunch to class and eat in the classroom. The instructor knew that the only option for the young groundskeeper to take the class was to do so during his lunch break.

Skipping ahead in the story, the groundskeeper eventually graduated with a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of California at Berkeley. Today, Dr. Uri Treisman is the Professor of Mathematics and Public Affairs at the University of Texas. He was named "2006 Scientist of the Year" by the Harvard Foundation of Harvard University for his outstanding contributions to mathematics. Dr. Treisman was the keynoter at our mathematics convening. His work with the Carnegie Foundation for Education is having a great deal of influence in our thinking as we approach math redesign, and I would encourage you to view the presentation he made here in North Carolina which we have recorded for and posted on our new SuccessNC web site. We will e-mail the link to you.

Dr. Treisman is noted for saying that developmental math is the graveyard of college aspirations. Our work with SuccessNC attempts to address this challenge head on while we continue to wrestle with the issues surrounding financial aid. We can't let a lack of resources limit access and success for even one future Uri Treisman.