

President's Report
State Board of Community Colleges
Dr. R. Scott Ralls, President
Friday, July 15, 2011

On Tuesday, I participated in a phone interview with a consulting group that had been pointed in our direction by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In initiating the interview, they explained they had been retained to help discover ways colleges could find efficiencies so as to foster greater student success and program completions and that their purpose in talking to us was because we were noted nationally as being at the leading edge of this work. When they said that, I chuckled and mentioned to them the irony of the timing. I had just finished reading through newspaper articles reporting on the Program Evaluation Division's study and the recommendations to merge up to 22 of our colleges to make us more efficient.

Their call echoed for me something that was not reflected in the recent Efficiency Study – the very significant steps toward efficiency and student success that are happening at our colleges and system-wide. These steps frequently prompt attention nationwide, or opportunities like the recent Gates Foundation Completion by Design announcement, but like so many things, but don't seem to seem to garner much recognition in our own backyard.

Community colleges in our state are diligently pursuing efficiencies not because someone recommended that we need to do so, but because in being focused on our students' success – and with 28 percent more students than we had just three years ago combined with the budget cuts we've faced – you just have to be more efficient.

The impacts are sometimes very visible – like when Edgecombe Community College, one of the fastest growing colleges in the country, contracted with a company to bring in extra chairs to fill up every possible foot of every potential classroom, or like Randolph Community College, a college that was just taken off accreditation warning to accommodate the huge influx of students.

It can be seen in the 56 academic programs that were terminated by colleges over a recent six-month period, in the fact that our System Office now operates with 47 less people than we did three years ago, or in the various pictures we have collected of registration lines at campuses that go out buildings into parking lots and seemingly snake into another county.

But a reason why we receive recognition from some is not only because we are trying to **work** our way through our challenges, but we are also trying to **think** our way through them as well.

For instance, our Developmental Education Initiative has leading math faculty from our colleges around the state hunkered down redesigning our developmental math curriculum so that it can be modularized around eight, one-hour credit courses and can be accomplished in a one-year period. They have examined all of the competencies to make sure they are appropriate, and after pilot testing this fall, implementation in the future will mean that we can match students to the most appropriate teaching interventions. Further, through our work with the public schools on aligning our testing, we will be able to collectively work together to ensure that fewer students will require remediation when they come to us. These efforts will not only lead to efficiencies in the use of state resources, but huge reductions in costs for students who struggle through our current developmental sequences.

Then there is our Super CIP (Curriculum Improvement Process), where faculty across the state have been diligently working to rethink our curriculum standards for technical education. With the new models that will be proposed, I anticipate we will be able to attain the efficiencies of offering fewer total degree offerings, while being even more responsive to employers through the incorporation of industry-recognized credentials stacked within a degree.

These are just a few of the big, cross-cutting system-wide efforts where our colleges are engaged as part of our SuccessNC efforts, and I believe our track record proves we will be capable of succeeding. Why? Because our System has been creating success in a big way for nearly 50 years.

For example, ours is the System that seamlessly implemented approximately one-quarter of the Early College High Schools in the United States onto our campuses producing huge efficiencies in educational seamlessness. Ours is the System that accomplished the largest collective information technology implementation, I believe, in the history of higher education. A feat we celebrate today through the naming of the Herbert L. Watkins College Information System. And we did all of this during a time when our budgets did not exceed beyond a one-to-one ratio with our enrollment growth.

Our System's history of accomplishment, our dedication to help every student that walks through our doors, and our vision for the future means that we are poised for big things. Those will continue to include significant opportunities for efficiency gains that I believe will dwarf the savings of \$5 million that could come from consolidating up to 22 colleges in 15 mergers, an amount that is less than 5 percent of the \$117 million in annual cuts that the colleges received in the recently passed state budget.

But there is a big part of community colleges that is not about plans and strategies, and cannot be captured on a spreadsheet. It is an aspect of community colleges that was not mentioned in the recent Program Evaluation Division Efficiency Study. It is that intangible aspect of a

community college that makes it more than a place where classes occur, but also a hub of leadership, a beacon of economic hope, and a catalyst for family and community transformation.

It is an intangible that is particularly noted in many of the communities where colleges were identified for potential merger – communities that have greater than 11 percent unemployment and support a significant number of our state’s most economically distressed counties.

It is an intangible that I recognized back in 2001 on the night I received a call from Dr. Ann Britt, the President of Martin Community College. Ann and the other college leaders had been catalysts in working with local business and economic development leaders to focus on a broad-based education strategy for their county’s economic future – a county which at that time had the highest unemployment in North Carolina. Their spirit had captured the attention of a business that was in town that day kicking Martin County’s tires as the possible location for a new industrial plant.

As then Vice President for Economic Development, I was almost to Wilmington that evening, for a meeting to be held early the next morning when I got the call from Ann, who with worry in her voice, asked if there was any way I could turn around and head to Williamston. Apparently the company had been wowed by a neighboring state, and while they loved the enthusiasm they saw in Martin County, they weren’t convinced that they could be as successful there.

I got to Williamston later that evening, and when I walked into the home where the meeting took place, I immediately understood the spirit that captured the company’s attention. In the home that evening were about 30 community and college leaders, and together with Anne and Stan Crowe, a local economic developer and businessman, we collectively helped convince the company to create jobs in that distressed county, jobs that are still employing North Carolinians today.

Now if there had been a multi-campus in Martin County, our System certainly could have provided the training that we later provided to the newly employed workers at that company. But if there had not been the leadership of Ann Britt and Martin Community College, we never would have had the opportunity because I think the company would have ended up in the neighboring state.

That’s just one example of the intangible nature of community colleges, and it is the factor that promotes such affection from our citizens, particularly in some of those corners of the state and in communities where they sometimes feel like they don’t have much else.

It is that type of appreciation that prompted the reaction from a 91-year-old retired business man, who upon learning about the recommendation to possibly merge smaller colleges, made his way to his much-beloved Rockingham Community College to see if he could lend his support. This gentleman's first encounter with Rockingham and our System came decades ago when, after a meeting at the college to hear the concerns of local employers, 15 of his electricians received training that made them not only better employees but made the company more productive. Then his wife and aunt took courses at the college, and when his wife passed, he established a scholarship in her name at Rockingham to give back to **his** college and **his** community. In his opinion, Rockingham Community College has helped countless individuals and is the best thing that's ever happened to **his** county.

This gentleman dictated his story to Lynn Brisson, the Public Information Officer at Rockingham, because he was not able to write it himself. He then sent the story to the co-chairs of the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee, and in sharing his story with us, Lynn wrote: "People truly love their community colleges. They support it with funds. They entrust their education and the education of family members to it. They remember family members through their donations and scholarships. They advance their companies because of it. It is a source of pride. Intellectually, I knew it, but that is what this 91-year-old gentleman brought home to me so eloquently this morning."

I believe that the strength of our community colleges is that they are not franchises, but locally led, locally focused institutions that have been cultivated over time by their communities so as to always be there for their communities and citizens, particularly in the most difficult of times. I believe that the cost of losing that nature of our colleges is not worth the price of saving \$5 million annually.

I believe in One North Carolina, a concept we touted years ago during the days of the North Carolina Rural Prosperity Task Force, and in the notion that our state is only as strong as its weakest links. I believe it's worth the extra investment to support the leadership that can be provided by local colleges in our more rural areas and that make the notion of One North Carolina more than just a hollow slogan.

I believe that as stewards of tax payer dollars, and to fulfill our much-needed, much-in-demand mission of providing quality, affordable education, it is incumbent on each of us to diligently seek out every opportunity we can for efficiency gains. But I don't believe we should change the very nature of our System by consolidating up to 22 community colleges in our state through 15 mergers. I believe that juice just isn't worth the squeeze.