

President's Report
State Board of Community Colleges
Dr. R. Scott Ralls, President
Friday, October 21, 2011

I have in the past referred to the site where we are today as North Carolina community college “holy ground.” This is a beautiful brand new facility, built on the old Canon Mills site, and as a site, it has great meaning with respect to our origins, our mission, and our future.

In the 1950s, a young engineer, named A. Wade Martin, worked at this site when it was Cannon Mills. In 1957, the same year that the state’s first industrial education center was opened in Alamance County, Martin was hired by Governor Luther Hodges to be the head of the state Department of Public Instruction’s Trade and Industrial-Education Division.

It was Governor Hodges’ vision – the business governor as, I believe he was referred to at the time, and later referred to as the economic development governor – to diversify the state’s economy beyond tobacco, textiles and furniture production. North Carolina at the time was one of the poorest states in the nation with a per capita income average only 63 percent of the national average.

Governor Hodges’ two great economic visions were educationally driven. One was to develop a research park in the middle of a pine forest between three great universities – a then-radical idea that we now know as the Research Triangle Park. The other radical idea was the creation of a state network of industrial education centers, the forerunner of what is today the North Carolina Community College System. And thus was born the mantra frequently heard since that time in North Carolina that “education is economic development.”

Herman Porter, our former State Board Chair and the former president at Wayne Community College, was one of the planning pioneers at that time, and he once told me that there was a house in Raleigh where on one floor worked the folks who were planning out what would be Research Triangle Park, and on another floor were the folks responsible for the Industrial Education Centers including, Wade Martin and others – great foreshadowing, I believe, for the collaborative roles the two systems of higher education have played in transforming this state.

In 1957, Wade Martin left his job here to lead the state's new workforce training effort, after having been given the task by Governor Hodges to visit other states, particularly in the Northeast, to find out what it would take to build new factories in North Carolina. The overwhelming answer was a trained workforce. So in 1958, the first customized job training program was initiated, a program that has since been replicated around the world.

Wade Martin, by the way, was eventually recruited to South Carolina to set up the technical college system there, along with North Carolina's chief industry recruiter, during a fateful week when Governor Hodges was out of the state. Legend has it that when, after returning to North Carolina, Governor Hodges called Governor Fritz Hollings to complain, Governor Hollings allegedly said, "you better be careful about leaving the state again or Mrs. Hodges could be the next person to move to South Carolina."

So fast forward 44 years to July 2003, what is considered D-Day for plant closings for North Carolina, when 5,500 North Carolinians, who worked at this site and other North Carolina Pillowtex facilities, lost their jobs on a single day in our state's largest closing on record. Luckily, the system which Wade Martin helped

develop for Governor Hodges had matured, and a particular institution, Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, set a national model for how a community's college responds to an economic downturn.

With support from a National Emergency Grant from the Department of Labor, Rowan-Cabarrus developed additional enrollment capacity and ultimately enrolled 52 percent of the nearly 4,000 local citizens who lost their jobs with Pillowtex. Many students enrolled in trade and technical programs, particularly machining, HVAC, automotive, welding and electrical, due to the "hands on" nature of the work they offered and the skills they could transfer from their work in the mills.

Initial challenges for many of the Pillowtex employees included a lack of jobs with sustainable wages, limited experience with computers and technology, and reduced career readiness skills.

Rowan-Cabarrus established a community-based career center in Kannapolis to help guide and direct displaced workers and help them explore opportunities in the community. More than 6,500 individuals have received 20,000-plus services.

In July of 2005, the U.S. Department of Labor awarded a special Recognition of Excellence to Rowan-Cabarrus Community College and the North Carolina Community College System for our efforts.

But the role of this historic site in our System's history did not end there. Out of the ashes of the Canon Mills closing arose the North Carolina Research Campus where today this private-public venture, with strong support from David Murdock, owner of Dole Food and Castle and Cooke, Inc., works to develop collaborations that will further advancements in the fields of biotechnology,

nutrition, and health. These collaborations include eight universities and our own Rowan-Cabarrus Community College. Mr. Murdock's vision is for the 350-acre NC Research Campus to become the world's epicenter of nutrition and disease research.

I personally think it is very fitting that, when once there was a house in Raleigh where university folks and what would later become community college folks worked side-by-side – or at least floor-by-floor – to transform a state through higher education, today community college instructors and university researchers work side-by-side to do the same thing for this region at the North Carolina Research Campus – on the very site where one of our pioneers, Wade Martin, once worked and where one of our most shining examples of community college responsiveness occurred.

Today, in conclusion, I am honored to recognize Jeanie Moore, Vice President of Advancement and Corporate Education at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, who helped lead the recovery effort here, and in July 2008, testified to Congress to help share her insights on how community colleges can respond to economic disasters. And she will recognize a special guest, Paula Lail of Kannapolis, who embodies the transformative role community colleges play in creating success, one North Carolinian at a time through hope, opportunity, and pathways to jobs.

Jeanie.