

President's Report
Dr. R. Scott Ralls
State Board of Community Colleges
April 17, 2015

This month's board meeting has had a lot of moving parts, and when things are really flying around, I find it is often good to step back, take a deep breath, and find focus. And in community colleges, that focus starts and stops with students.

So what better month to find students as our anchor point because, as proclaimed by Governor Pat McCrory, April is "North Carolina Community College Excellence Month." As we start to wrap up another academic year, this is that time of year when we recognize those many students who have achieved greatly. And in so many cases have overcome obstacles that at one time appeared as mountains in their path.

Across the state this month, we are recognizing the Academic Excellence Award recipients, the "Great within the 58," from throughout our System. I hope at some point you will have the opportunity to go to our web page and read each of their statements of success. I promise you will be gratified and moved.

Because when you look at our students' success you not only see the accomplishment in how they finished – high GPAs, numerous extracurricular and community activities – all the achievements you think of regarding student success. But you also see the enormity of accomplishment, especially given how some have started.

As the great distance runner, Steve Prefontaine, once said, "Success isn't how far you got. But the distance you traveled from where you started."

At least seven of our AEA recipients started as high school dropouts, beginning their college careers pursuing a GED. Zachary James of Pamlico Community College, Joanna Cheek of Piedmont Community College, Mitchell Cleary of Davidson County Community College, Thu Vu of Gaston College, and Monca Spencer of Randolph Community College.

Married to a welder and starting with her GED, Leslie Raynor of James Sprunt Community College is also becoming a welder, while Joshua Babb of Sandhills Community College has taken a different path as a former high school dropout and has been accepted to UNC Chapel Hill next fall.

Continuing a trend, six of our AEA recipients started in our Early College High School programs: Xee Cindy Xiong of Stanly Community College, Becky Leon of Lenoir Community College, Rachel Rena Maynor of Robeson Community College, Kayla Wolverson of Roanoke-Chowan Community College, and Kayla Myers of Wilkes Community College. Shanita Jackson was homeless when she began as an Early College student at Blue Ridge Community College.

Three of our AEA stars started their journeys from other countries – Paula Alanis from Mexico to South Piedmont Community College, Anastasia Izvekova from Russia to College of The Albemarle, and Moza Hamud from Kenya to Central Piedmont Community College.

At least six of our AEA recipients are recent veterans including Army vets Gary Johnson of Guilford, Robin Novak of Bladen Community College, William Koch of Cape Fear Community College, Isaac Phillips of Central Carolina Community College, and Marine vet, Andrew Brewer. U.S. Navy veteran, Marley Templeman of Brunswick Community College is a vet and also a single mother.

Also joining the list of single mothers includes Scarlett Burgess of Fayetteville Tech, and Chanda Sherrill of Catawba Valley Community College, both started college after being laid off from their jobs. Danielle Williams of Beaufort County Community College is a different type of Mom, having supported three foster children, and single Mom, Sadie Herndon, who has a 4.0 in paralegal technology at Wilson Community College summed up the opportunities she and so many other community college success stories have experienced this way:

“America is a nation founded on hard work and ingenuity. When obstacles and adversity have you down, the only option you have is to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and move forward.”

Each year we always select the one student who exemplifies this “moving forward” spirit, our Dr. Dallas Herring Achievement Award recipient, who demonstrates the desire Dr. Herring expressed when he challenged us to take people where they are and carry them as far as they can go.

And it is remarkably inspiring to see how far Stella Galyean, our 2015 Dallas Herring Award recipient, has gone. Raised in a family where no one had more than a sixth-grade education, in a home marked by both drug and domestic abuse, Stella also dropped out of school in the sixth grade. But refusing to be defined by her challenging circumstances, which also included overcoming cervical cancer, this mother of five children made her way to Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College where she acquired her GED and has kept going and going and going – President of the A-B Tech Phi Theta Kappa and Vice President of the Carolina’s Region Phi Theta Kappa, a Coca-Cola Silver Scholar and member of the All-USA Community College Academic Team, and recipient of the K. Ray Bailey Golf Classic Scholarship. Next month, she will graduate with honors and transfer to East Tennessee State. I don’t know if you all noticed, but I think Dallas Herring started smiling in his portrait on the wall over there while I was telling you about Stella.

In fact, I think I’ve seen some smiles on that portrait several times this year, as Dr. Herring has had a front row seat to watch the leadership of La’Quon Rogers, who has not only served as a valued State Board member and President of the North Carolina Comprehensive Community College Student Government Association, but is also this year’s Governor Bob Scott Leadership Award recipient. In all sincerity, I don’t think anyone of us could imagine a student who just oozes leadership more than La’Quon. If anyone ever wanted to see a display of leadership in action, they should have seen La’Quon at the annual student conference last month. He’s a pretty talented singer as well, and I’m making a request of him to share that song with us next month as many of our Board members will participate in their last full meeting.

But I want us to also remember that behind every student success is a remarkable effort and impact made by community college teachers and staff. These people – the community college people, the people of the

open door -- can't just be transactional about their jobs. They are called on to be transformational.

I was thinking about that when I again read the story of Brad Easter, Surry Community College's Academic Excellence Award recipient. I had the great fortune to meet Brad at a student event a little over a year ago, and was struck by the candor, sincerity and eloquence in how he expressed the impact the community college had in his life. In the interest of time, I should paraphrase what he said in the personal testimony he wrote for the Academic Excellence Award. But I could never adequately paraphrase the essence of the community college experience that Brad expressed in his essay, so please indulge me as I conclude my President's Report with Brad's full submission. I think you will agree it is worth the extra time.

From Brad Easter:

"Almost three years ago to the day, I was sitting in the same spot on the couch that I'm sitting in now typing this essay. It is only by reflecting back on that painful night three years ago that I'm able to put into words my 'success story' involving my NC Community College experience.

About eight days before Christmas in 2011, I was without a job. I left my job a couple of months before to pursue the degree that I was missing in order to move up in the business world. Unfortunately, I backed out from signing up for the upcoming spring semester. I had convinced myself that I was worthless and would not be able to go to school after being out for almost 20 years. I had just made a phone call to my mom and my aunt to let them know that I didn't have money to buy my two girls gifts for Christmas that year. I also had to swallow my pride and sign up for public assistance for my family in order to put food on the table. I was not only monetarily broke, but I was broke in spirit as well. To sum it up, I was a shell of myself and a broken man. In my heart, I didn't think I would ever recover. I can't remember a Christmas season as painful as that one.

Over the first several months of 2012, I battled many demons from inside. I tried to keep myself intact for my family, but I was empty and hopeless on the inside. My family kept bringing my college aspirations up to me, but the voice inside my head was ready to quickly battle off any thoughts of

pursuing it. This internal emotional and external financial battle went on for the first half of 2012.

At the first of May 2012, I found myself at home without my wife or kids. This was very rare. My wife was going to be gone for the day with the kids, and I had the whole day to myself. I'm not sure why I did this, but I put on a polo shirt and a pair of jeans and rode over to Surry Community College. I had finally made the big step.....all the way to the parking lot that is!

After at least an hour of sitting in my car, I decided to walk into the Student Services area. I avoided making eye contact with anyone because I wouldn't know what to say if they asked me a question. At the time, I was just trying to talk myself into staying in the building. As I watched all the young men and women walk in and out, I quickly felt out of place. I sat in a chair and started flipping through a catalog making my plans to escape.

There have been many experiences at Surry Community College that have changed my life, but it all started with what I'm getting ready to tell you. As I was making my plans to leave, I heard someone say, "What can I help you with today?" I looked up and Mr. Tony Searcy was standing over me. He invited me in his office and the only words I was able to mumble out was, "I want to go to school." Within no time at all, Mr. Searcy had helped me register and sign up for the upcoming summer semester with all online classes in order to fit my stay-at-home dad responsibilities.

I believe that we can only truly measure what success is to one person if we know the story of what they have gone through to get there. What I consider a success might not be the same as the next person. I told you the back story above for a reason. Dolly Parton once said, "Don't judge the cover because I'm a pretty good book." I believe this to be true of my Surry Community College success story.

Fast forward almost exactly three years—I'm sitting in that same spot on the couch writing a letter for consideration for a North Carolina Community College Academic Award. I am the Vice-President of Phi Theta Kappa and the President for the National Society of Leadership and Success. I have made the President's List for every semester during my time at SCC. I was selected to be part of the Student Leadership Development Program in Raleigh this past summer and will graduate from the program this March. I

am also working now because of Surry Community College! I'm a part-time computer instructor in the Continuing Education department. I'm also working on a Monthly Leadership Luncheon for 2015 in which we will bring leaders in our area to the school for motivational/leadership training during lunch once a month. I'm also just five courses away from graduating this coming spring with my Associate Degree in Business Administration. My kids have presents under the tree that my wife and I purchased, and I'm able to hold and hug each one of them every day with the confidence that a dad should have. I also have gifts for my aunt and mom under the tree and it feels great!

I can't think of a darker place to be than sitting in a hole without hope. Well, Surry Community College turned my life around. Sometimes we advance in life not because we believe in ourselves, but because others believe in us. When I wasn't strong enough to believe in myself, people at SCC believed in me. I don't put myself up on a pedestal for any of these accomplishments. It is actually quite the opposite. I am humbled by everything I have accomplished and been recognized for. I have found a strong passion for teaching others inside of me through my journey at SCC. It would be an honor to hold this prestigious Award and pass on the message of hope that North Carolina Community Colleges can offer anyone who is willing to just 'walk in the door'."

Now everyone look real quick, I know that portrait of Dallas Herring is smiling.