President’s Report  
President George Fouts  
State Board of Community Colleges  
Friday, December 4, 2015

During my September report, I mentioned how much I have enjoyed reading Dr. Scott Ralls’ President’s Reports to the State Board of Community Colleges, which almost always focused on a student success story. I told you that I intended to present a variety of issues in my reports but also to share a student success story at times. With the approaching holidays, this month seemed a good time to do so.

On the first day of September in 1973, I arrived at Western Piedmont Community College for my first day as instructor of English and Philosophy. It was orientation in the morning and registration of new students in the afternoon.

I had been offered the job in February of that year so, while I was finishing up course work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I read everything I could find about community colleges and talked frequently with the only two professors there who seemed to know that community colleges even existed.

During those days, the most prolific researcher and writer on community colleges was Dr. Patricia Cross, who wrote about the so-called “new student,” that student who would not have ever attended college had not a community college opened its doors in the region.

In the 1960s and early 1970s when a community college was being started every week in America, hundreds of thousands of high school graduates had an opportunity not available to them in prior decades. Those new students, along with returning Vietnam veterans, made up the bulk of my classes.

I needed all that background reading in my encounter with my first advisee, a young woman named Beverly who had graduated the previous year from Drexel High School in Burke County.

Beverly entered the office frightened, not at all talkative and with absolutely no eye contact. Drawing on my readings of Patricia Cross’s research, I wanted to make Beverly at ease before we began the advisement process. So, I asked her about where she went to high school, what she had done over the summer, what her favorite subjects were, and the like. She was not very responsive, but I did learn that her goal was to become an elementary school teacher.

She still had not looked me in the eye, but I knew that I needed to work out her schedule and get her over to the library where she would be given her punch cards for class registration.
So, I moved forward by asking Beverly if she had a chance over the summer to look over the catalogue, to which she responded: “No sir, we didn’t order anything last year,” referring more to the Sears catalogue than the Western Piedmont variety. I had met the community college new student face-to-face.

I got Beverly registered, and she ended up in one of my developmental English sections. Over the next two quarters I began to talk with her about some sort of career other than that of an elementary school teacher. It was clear to me and to other faculty who taught her that Beverly would be better suited to another career path.

Beverly became a daily reminder of Dallas Herrings’ famous admonition to community college professionals – take students where they are and take them as far as they are capable of going.

Yet, despite my advising and work with Beverly, after that first year, she just disappeared from Western Piedmont, and I never saw her again during my sixteen years at that college.

Another student of mine that first year was Jim Burnett. In 2008, 35 years after I first met him, Dr. James Burnett, then president of Western Piedmont Community College, invited me to be the commencement speaker. I was thrilled with the invitation and the opportunity to return to Morganton and Burke County for the event.

After the commencement exercises, I was in the lobby mingling with old friends, when a mother approached me with her daughter, who was still in her graduation gown.

The mother looked me straight in the eye and said, “Mr. Fouts, you won’t remember me, but you were my teacher years ago.” It was Beverly from 1973, her daughter was graduating from Western Piedmont that night and had been accepted at Appalachian State to study elementary education.

Beverly and I had a long conversation that night. She had indeed disappeared from the college after that first year in 1973, worked in a textile mill, got married, had children and lived a happy life in Drexel.

She never could shake her original goal of working with children, had returned to the college in the early 1990s, earned an early childhood certificate and had been working for many years in a church day care facility in Burke County.

As I wrote this report, my focus was on Beverly as an example of ultimate student success which involved a redirection of her original plans but still eventually found her pathway to success at Western Piedmont. But it is also a story of the success of two more students: Beverly’s daughter, working on fulfilling that long-sought elementary teaching degree, and Jim Burnette, who went from a community college student to an outstanding community college president.
North Carolina’s community colleges produce countless stories of such success along pathways that are often long and sometimes not so straight. In this story, there is also evidence that often our success is now multi-generational.

On Christmas Eve, I will be at First Moravian Church in Greensboro, celebrating the Moravian Love Feast that began in 1727. During this Feast, a time of looking back and forward, I will remember those of have promoted our success over the last 50 years and give thanks for the unexpected opportunity you have given me to temporarily lead this system of community colleges.

Merry Christmas to you all.