President’s Report to the State Board
North Carolina Community College System
July 19, 2013

Fifty years ago this month, a system of American Dream Machines began operation in the state of North Carolina. Based on a philosophy of total education, a belief in the incomparable worth of all human beings, and an open-door mission to take people where they are and carry them as far as they can go, community colleges helped move this state from one of the poorest in the nation to one internationally noted for its economic achievement.

The late UNC System President Bill Friday once told me that community colleges were America’s unique contribution to education. I tend to think of community colleges in broader terms than the limitations of education alone. Community colleges I believe are, “American Dream Machines,” the unique place where anyone with a perseverance of spirit and a desire to learn, can propel themselves down a pathway of progress – regardless of their means, their status or their previous level of academic preparedness. You just bring the heart and the drive. We provide everything else.

For most of the past fifty years, community colleges have been fairly unsung and operated in relative obscurity, in spite of the fact that we now account for more undergraduate students than four-year colleges. Some of that began to change five years ago when the economy started turning South. All of a sudden, appreciation for community colleges started becoming boiler plate lines in political speeches and the subject of think-tank reports.

In just the past few months, two important reports have noted the importance of community colleges in reaccelerating the American Dream.

Bridging the American Divide, a report from the Century Foundation subtitled Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream, noted that over time, community colleges have increasingly become the main route to post-secondary education for students from low-income and working class families. High socioeconomic status (SES) students today outnumber low SES students by 14 to one at the most competitive four-year colleges, but at community colleges, low socioeconomic students out number high SES students by a margin of two to one.

As President Emeritus Ben Fountain reminded us at a recent meeting, community colleges have not forgotten about the poor people.

Another significant recent education report from the Council of Foreign Relations had this to say:
Community colleges serve the most postsecondary students and have absorbed a disproportionate share of the historic college enrollment increase among black, Hispanic, and low-income students. They also have the highest dropout rates. If the United States becomes a world leader in college degrees by 2020, it will be in large part because more students are finishing community college and similar vocational programs.

Some would point to this and similar other statements as an example of how we have made significant gains rhetorically, but also suggest we have yet to make similar gains monetarily. In other words, we are likely to find ourselves increasingly in the lines of political speeches, but experience few changes in terms of lines in budgets.

The Century Foundation Report had this remarkable fact:

Between 1999 and 2009, per-pupil operating expenditures increased by almost $14,000 at private research universities, over $4,000 at public research universities, but only by $1 at community colleges.

That’s not a misstatement – only a $1 increase in per pupil operating expenditures at community colleges over a ten-year period.

Our efficiency during a decade of what has been referred to by some as, “the higher education bubble,” is something else community colleges should be lauded for.

But while we are taking this opportunity to pat ourselves on the back during this birth month of our 50th Year Anniversary, I think it is important to note that while statistics suggest we significantly trail other sectors in funding and expenditure levels, I think we are really the richest education sector of all.

And it all goes back to our role as the American Dream Machine. I know of no other institution that produces the richness of human success stories that community colleges do. Last month, I had a great example of that. At our Student Leadership Development Institute, I asked three students to voluntarily tell their stories of overcoming odds. They did so as only community college students uniquely can do, and afterwards I was bombarded by the majority of other students in attendance who wanted to also share their stories or to share the stories of their friends back home. Some would say only in America, and I would proudly add, quintessentially at community colleges.

And so at this time, our 50th year anniversary, it is important to focus on what we have, not what we lack, what we accomplish, not what we fall short on – and to remind us of the spirit of the American Dream that thrives at each of North Carolina’s 58 community colleges.
And in that spirit, I invited Brian Pham, a graduate of Mayland Community College and the recipient of our 50th Year Anniversary Dallas Herring Award, to tell his remarkable story today. Brian’s story truly embodies Dr. Herring’s philosophy of taking people where they are and carrying them as far as they can go, and even though Brian was born about as far away from North Carolina as one can get, I’m not sure I have ever heard a story that is a better embodiment of the American Dream.

As Brian comes to the podium, I would also like to ask Larry Shook, his teacher at Mayland Community College to stand. Those of you who participated in our System-wide Student Success Listening tour a few years ago recall some of the remarkable people we met and efforts taking place to further student success across our 58 community colleges. One of the people that stood out to me was Larry Shook, a great math instructor who passionately described the work they were doing at Mayland in their math learning lab to make student success real. Larry is a great community college hero, and he also truly embodies the Dallas Herring spirit of helping to carry people as far as they can go.