Today is an exciting day in the history of North Carolina’s Community Colleges as we welcome six new members to the State Board of Community Colleges and new leadership from our newly elected Chairman, Scott Shook, and Vice Chairman, Clyde Higgs.

Each of you come to these positions with strong backgrounds in business, education, and/or public service, as well as unique local engagements with individual community colleges that will add to our collective ability for stewardship of this remarkable system. I am rather biased, but I do believe that the North Carolina Community College System is one of the most remarkable education systems in existence today. Few, if any higher education or workforce development systems can match the scale of collective impact that our colleges make.

Just think about it, we are a system of 58 colleges with 124 physical locations, located within just a 30-minute drive of over 99 percent of our state’s citizens. We offer perhaps the greatest combination of both geographic and financial accessibility to higher education in the country, with one of the lowest tuition rates for our degree programs and unparalleled state support for our workforce training programs. We are the most comprehensive community college system in the nation, if not the world, offering more education and workforce development programmatic opportunities than any other two-year system in the world. Each year one out of every nine North Carolina adults participates in one or more of our programs, and today, over 40 percent of North Carolina’s wage earners have been a student at one of our 58 community colleges in the last 10 years.

We are a system that does big things collectively. These big collective actions, if we are not careful, can easily slip by without notice or fanfare. Think about it: today, you approved a sweeping change to all of our information technology programs, based on collective faculty work over the past year, integrating nine former degrees into a more efficient single degree program that effectively offers greater opportunity for stackable certifications that will better meet the demands of the IT industry and improve the employment opportunities of our students.

No system of community colleges in recent years has received more national recognition than we have for taking strategic collective actions for student success and better program completion rates. No where will you find a greater strategic collaborative with our education partners, with few if any states providing more developed dual-enrollment opportunities for high school students or more comprehensive, seamless articulation opportunities for students transferring to universities.
And obviously, we are a system that has remarkable economic impact, estimated annually at $21.5 billion, or the equivalent of 4.9 percent of our North Carolina’s Gross State Product or 375,000 new jobs. Every dollar taxpayers invest in our community colleges is estimated to produce $4.10 in added taxes and public sector savings. We are a system where every individual college is made stronger by its membership, and where, as Rudyard Kipling would say, “The strength of the wolf is the pack.”

All that being said, however, I personally believe that the most important word in our name is “community,” and it is vital for us to always remember that our colleges are not franchise operations. They have the individuality and flexibility to support the diversity of communities, economic and labor markets they support, and it is that that individuality and flexibility that is core to their strength and our strength as a system. As Rudyard Kipling also said, “The strength of the pack is the wolf.”

During my time in this role, perhaps my greatest joy has been my time outside of Raleigh visiting the local colleges and marveling at what they accomplish. I long ago adopted the practice of declaring that whatever college I happened to be visiting on a particular day was “the best community college in North Carolina.” Part of that was a brazen attempt to curry local favor, but I also believed what I was saying. Because each of our community colleges is the very best community college in the country for supporting the local community they have been designed and nurtured over years to serve. There is no other college in the country that could be plugged into the far western mountains and, with the same resources, do a better job of serving the people and communities far west of the balsams than Tri-County, nor one dropped into Onslow County that would do a better job of serving the Camp Lejeune military community than Coastal Carolina.

One thing that is sometimes challenging at the State Board and System Office levels is that it is more difficult to taste the local flavor on a regular basis, which is why every Board member’s local background and continued local engagement is so important. By the very nature of our State roles, we talk in the context of state policies, programs, budgets and contracts. We see data pictures that roll students up into large collective numbers across colleges. And while we must have the discipline to make data-informed policy decisions that will have the greatest overall state impact, we have to also be ever mindful that the real “secret sauce” of student success at community colleges is the local community-based engagement of students, teachers, staff, advocates and community champions.

That is one of the reasons that for the past seven years of closing State Board meetings with President’s Reports, I have tried to weave into each one a local story of community college student success. I’m biased in that I believe that community colleges are the most important institutions in our nation today in providing pathways to the American dream. As I close out my tenure in this role, I have enjoyed in the past few months following up on some of these amazing success stories, just as I shared with you last month the update on Dr. Brenda Lopez.
One of my favorite student success stories over the past few years is the story of Brian Pham, a community college story that emphasizes our unique role as pathways to the American Dream, even though Brian’s story started as about as far away from America as you can get, the jungles of Vietnam. In 1989, at the age of 12, Brian’s father woke him up in the middle of the night and had him say goodbye to his mother and sisters. He was taking him away to flee the country.

At that time they were living in the communist-controlled area of Vietnam, and for the next three days they walked through the jungles of Vietnam to avoid being caught. Eventually reaching the shore, Brian’s father bribed a man who owned a rice boat, and they were hidden away in the compartment and eventually made it to Malaysia. For the next seven years, Brian lived in a series of United Nations refugee camps until finally being allowed into the United States, arriving in Atlanta with no formal education, no money and speaking only broken English. Brian took a job in a warehouse to support the rest of his family, who miraculously were also allowed into the U.S., reuniting with his mother and sisters from Vietnam. Over the next few years, Brian supported his little sister in going to college, met his future wife, also a Vietnamese immigrant, started a family and eventually moved to Burnsville where he and his wife purchased a little nail salon. Brian, by the way, has a unique accent that combines the influence of both Vietnam and the northwestern North Carolina mountains.

In January of 2011, Brian’s American dream really started cranking into gear when he was able to enroll at Mayland Community College, his first real formal education. Something else very fortuitous happened, he met Larry Shook, an incredible math instructor, who has been one of my favorite community college instructor heroes since the day I first met him. Larry became not only Brian’s math teacher but also his mentor and champion.

Here’s where Brian’s story gets really interesting. Turns out that he is a complete math genius. I mean an off the charts math genius.

While at Mayland, Brian had a perfect 4.0 grade point average not only taking the most difficult math courses, but also helping to teach them. In 2013, he was awarded our prestigious Dr. Dallas Herring Student Achievement Award, the award the Presidents Association gives annually to the one student or alum who best exemplifies inspirational student accomplishment. Brian next enrolled at Appalachian State University, which allowed him to finish his four-year degree without moving his family.

The first week of July, I got an email from Larry Shook, to give me an update on Brian. Turns out Brian graduated from Appalachian State last May and one week after being chosen as the best student in the ASU Department of Finance, he was also chosen as the best ASU student in the Department of Mathematics.

Brian was contemplating moving forward into a Ph.D. program when he started being aggressively recruited by several companies including Hanover Reinsurance, a company with offices in Charlotte, Denver, and internationally. Brian accepted a
position and will be working in the area of the company that analyzes risk, a very lucrative opportunity and a very long, long way from the jungles of Vietnam. In his email to me, Larry described Brian’s reactions to the recruitment process and having such an opportunity before him. In his description of Brian’s excitement in talking about this new opportunity, Larry wrote: “Brian said that Hanover employs only the brightest, most gifted minds. I sat back and smiled as he spoke because I heard in his voice the joy of someone who had worked for something and realized a dream.” The next sentence Larry wrote was this, “I have a great job because I get to have a front row seat in seeing dreams come true.”

In those few words, Larry Shook, the Mayland Community College math instructor, summed up the extraordinary privilege each of us has in being connected to the North Carolina Community College System. New Board members, welcome to the front row seats.