

President's Report
President George Fouts
State Board of Community Colleges
Friday, March 18, 2016

Throughout our history, community colleges have been the Rodney Dangerfield of higher education. And, in some ways, we have contributed to that lack of respect. In my January report, I described how continuing education, particularly avocational rather than educational courses, introduced our just-forming colleges to their communities. In the 1960s, it was courses like lawn mower repair, beginning guitar and macramé that brought many adults to our community college campuses for the first time.

Some of those early yet popular courses brought us ridicule from newspaper editorials—poodle grooming at Durham Technical Community College, the history of “The Andy Griffith Show” at Guilford Technical Community College, and crab picking at Beaufort County Community College.

And this perception problem was not confined to North Carolina during the 60s and 70s.

Prior to becoming the president of the American Association of Community Colleges, Dale Parnell was Chancellor of the California Community Colleges. In the late 1960s, he wrote a great article entitled, “Will Belly Dancing be our Nemesis?” It is not surprising that, while North Carolina’s community colleges in the 60s were offering macramé, California’s were reaching out to their communities through belly dancing.

But, Dr. Parnell’s point was that those offerings were causing him difficulty as he walked the halls of California’s legislature trying to get attention for support of college transfer and worker training programs.

Over the past 53 years, the jokes about community colleges have become fewer but still exist. Look at “Big Bang Theory,” one of the most popular series on TV today, where Penny’s taking a course at Pasadena City College is laughed at by her friends educated at Princeton and MIT.

To my knowledge, only two major motion pictures – “Larry Crowne” and “Good Will Hunting” – show community colleges, their students and their open door mission in a positive light.

I thought of this pop culture image of community colleges week before last when the University of North Carolina’s Board of Governors considered the NC Guaranteed Admission Program (NC GAP) report that was before you today. You will recall that, according to the News and Observer, Chancellor James Anderson of Fayetteville State University questioned why the university would want to defer students to community colleges “where open admissions mean that some of their classmates would be reading on a fifth-grade level.”

With that one remark, which I called regrettable and uninformed, our community colleges were thrown under the proverbial bus of humiliation.

Initially, there were those who wanted to write opinion pieces and letters to the editor responding to the chancellor’s characterization of our colleges and our students, but instead, we chose to work with our UNC partners to continue to address the issue at hand – NC GAP.

I immediately contacted President Margaret Spellings and requested a meeting with her the following week. We did meet and had lengthy conversation about NC GAP, our third such conversation since January.

I opened the conversation by expressing to President Spellings my desire to arrive at a position where we could prevent damage to our important and ongoing partnerships with the UNC system, and my obligation to defend the dignity and record of our community college transfer students’ success at four-year universities. By the conversation’s end, we had arrived at a path forward.

I have told you since last September that the NC GAP legislation was going to be difficult, especially for the University system and more especially for the historically black colleges and universities of that system.

So while I took great exception to Chancellor Anderson’s remark, I understood his defensive posture. It has occurred to me that his response was, in many ways, analogous to those presidents at our small rural community colleges that, on three occasions in our System’s history, faced possible merger with larger

community colleges. In an analogous way to Chancellor Anderson, they feared a loss of identity and a threat to their historic mission to their community.

Mine has not been an interim presidency with calm seas. We as staff and you as State Board members have struggled with three difficult policy matters, a statewide bond referendum, eight local presidential searches and a System Presidential search.

I appreciate both the amount of time and the thoughtfulness you have given to each of these challenges.

During our January meeting and near the end of the debate of the applied baccalaureate in nursing issue, State Board member Jerry Vaughn asked a very perceptive question. He asked, not expecting an answer it seemed, if resolving that issue was not the province of a group with powers greater than those that are given to this State Board of Community Colleges.

The NC GAP's goal of achieving a more efficient and economical – both to the state and to students – pathway to bachelor's degrees cannot solely be met by community colleges and this Board. It is a broader issue that requires continued attention from the UNC Board of Governors, from the NC General Assembly and from the Governor.

Over the past month, consulting frequently with our Chairman Scott Shook, I have discussed these issues with leaders at the University, at our colleges and in the legislature. I particularly want to thank Chairman Shook for both his guidance and support of my efforts.

Your action today helps us move forward in our work with each of those entities to achieve those goals.

Now, let me close by noting that Chancellor Anderson was somewhat correct in saying that our community colleges do teach students with fifth-grade and below reading levels. We have thousands of them each year who enroll in our basic skills and high school equivalency programs. And from our beginning, we have proudly accepted those students and helped them, in the words of Dr. Dallas Herring, "go as far as they can go".

As Dr. Herring said in his stump speech he gave hundreds of times as he crossed North Carolina advocating for the creation of community colleges: “The only valid philosophy for North Carolina is the philosophy of total education; a belief in the incomparable worth of all human beings, whose claims upon the state are equal before the law and equal before the bar of public opinion; whose talents (however great or however limited or however different from the traditional) the state needs and must develop to the fullest possible degree. That is why the doors to the institutions in North Carolina’s system of Community Colleges must never be closed to anyone of suitable age who can learn what they teach.”

Later in that speech, he added: “If they cannot read, then we will simply teach them to read and make them proud of that achievement.”

I often explain the open door philosophy this way. Selective admission colleges attempt to predict in advance of admission whether or not a student will be successful. Such colleges invest considerable funds in admission staffs and data analytic software to make those predictions.

Our open door community colleges do not even attempt to predict in advance whether or not a prospective student will be successful. Instead, we invest our funds in effective teachers and equally effective academic advisors who will create a learning climate where success is created rather than predicted.

In a nutshell, that is our mission—and I hope we never abandon it.