

SBCC February President's Report

Last June, when you selected me to serve as the system's interim president, I announced that I would not be a candidate in your search for what I labeled as a less-interim or longer-term president. I have kept that pledge.

After the new board was in place and you began the search process in August, I told staff that I wanted to keep myself out of that process even though I am obviously interested in the process and in the candidate you ultimately select.

Several potential candidates have talked with me about their candidacy over the past months, some using me as a sounding-board as they considered whether or not to apply. Each of them has sought my perspective on the nature of the job, about where our system is heading, and about the challenges of the position. As best I could, I have shared my thoughts with each of them as they pondered their decisions about applying.

Today, while I still seek to keep myself out of that process, I do want to offer some advice on the sort of candidate you select; not about which candidate you should select, but the characteristics of that candidate.

As you know, I have been involved in this system for 43 years. I have worked at five of our community colleges: two small rural colleges, two mid-sized colleges, and one of our largest colleges. In addition, I have twice worked at the System Office. As a result, I have witnessed both successful and failed presidencies at both the local and system level.

Based on those experiences, I have arrived at some general conclusions about indicators or predictors of success or failure in leadership in our community colleges.

Every seasoned presidential search consultant tells board members that their decision regarding a new president is the most important decision they will make as a board member. I could not agree more strongly with that judgement. The future success of this board and our system largely depends on the skills and character of the person you select to lead.

First, let me congratulate your search committee and the board at large on your progress thus far in your search. I am proud of the openness that you have

demonstrated in your search. You have sincerely sought involvement from our colleges, from system office employees, and from our host of partners and supporters as you developed your desired presidential profile. That said, please allow me a few minutes to offer some well-intentioned advice as you enter the final stages of your search.

First and foremost, you need to select a person who both understands and deeply values the comprehensive mission that created and sustains our work. No community college system in our nation has a mission as broad and complex as ours. We are charged by statute with providing adult basic education, adult high school equivalency credentials, degree programs that lead both to immediate meaningful employment and to successful transfer to baccalaureate degree granting colleges and universities, and a wide variety of continuing education, non-credit courses that provide specific skills that have market-place value. Those continuing education efforts range from general interest courses to customized job-training courses designed for both existing and expanding industries to new industries that locate in our state.

A successful leader must understand and embrace that total mission and equally value each. Our students enter our colleges for a variety of reasons. Each of them seeks what we offer to meet their individual needs and goals. A successful president, whether at the local or system level, values that individual's goal, and his or her individual definition of success. A successful president, therefore, does not value one aspect of our mission as more valuable than another.

Second, a successful president, again at both the local and system level, understands that he or she works for and is responsible to a board. The local board and the state board sets policy and guides implementation of that policy. The leaders they select must understand that their responsibility is not to establish policy but rather is to intentionally and sincerely lead the successful implementation of that policy.

To put it bluntly, your leader must understand that he or she works for the board. Many of our greatest leaders, both at the local and state levels, have not been employees who earned their livings through their work but volunteers who freely volunteered their time and talents to local and state boards. Those leaders include Dallas Herring and you.

Third, a successful president surrounds himself or herself with a talented team of individuals who share the two values previously described. They too must both understand and personally value the mission of North Carolina's community colleges. And, they must be committed to the principles of governance that have served our system well over the past five decades.

Fourth and finally, our next system president, must be willing to work both hard and long, to devote his or her fully energy to the challenges of leadership we now face and to those challenges that lie ahead. It is both a satisfying and difficult responsibility that requires equal amounts of courage and humility. I will tell you that my constant prayer since last June has been that I be granted both.

I would suggest to you that successful leaders in our history, again at both the local and system levels, have possessed these four characteristics. And those who have failed in their leaderships have lacked one or more of those talents.

If you chose a candidate who deeply shares each of those attributes, you will have carried out your responsibilities well, and I have every confidence that you will do so.

Thank you for allowing me to offer these thoughts to you, and thank you again for the wonderful opportunity to have served as your interim president.