Last week’s fall meeting of the North Carolina Association of Community College Trustees was by all accounts a hit, and in the opinion of several, the best ever. I was honored to be invited to participate in a lunch panel, moderated by our own Linda Weiner, and including Governor McCrory, Secretary of Commerce Sharon Decker, and Glenn Sherrill, the chair of the Workforce and Education Subcommittee of the recent North Carolina Economic Development Board. The panel discussed the direction of economic development in our state and the vision for NCWorks as part of the plan.

But that was only a part of what was a very successful conference, and one of the highlights for me was getting to meet many new college trustees who are excited, energetic and ready to contribute to their colleges and our System. One of the new community college trustees I ran into was also an old friend, Chuck Tyson a new trustee at Craven Community College. I still remember the morning after I was selected President at Craven when Chuck called me at my office. He introduced himself as Chair of the County Commissioners and welcomed me warmly, and Chuck, Jeannie, Lisa and I have been friends ever since.

I still recall something that Chuck told me that morning. He said that until a couple of years earlier, he didn’t think much of the community college. He said that it wasn’t that he thought poorly of Craven per se, it was just that, like a lot of other residents, he wasn’t aware of the magnitude of what happened at the community college. He told me that one particular experience turned him into a champion – seeing the vital role the college played in attracting Bosch and Siemens to locate their North American appliance park to New Bern, which created hundreds of new jobs. The training and education was custom designed and developed through Craven Community College. In fact, Craven and Bosh/Siemens were this Board’s first winners of the Distinguished Partners in Excellence Award.

Throughout my time in New Bern, Chuck was a major supporter of our college, helping us develop important connections that furthered our advocacy as well as
our endowment. Now, he is a new trustee and illustrates the vital role local trustees play in truly putting the word “community” into our community colleges.

Just as local trustees bring the community into our colleges, the experiences of many of you as former local college trustees help keep the important community perspective in our State Board deliberations. There’s Ann Whitford from Carteret, Clyde Higgs of Rowan-Cabarrus, Jann Lowder of Stanly, Candler Willis of Blue Ridge and James Woody of Piedmont. Two of our current committee chairs played instrumental roles at local community colleges as board leaders. Dr. Sam Powell, Chair of the Programs Committee, was Chair of the Board at Alamance Community College, and every time you drive on the campus of Guilford Tech, you are reminded of the role Dr. Stuart Fountain, Chair of our Strategic Planning Committee, played when you see his name prominently displayed on the dental building named in his honor.

And of course Lynn Raye, who, in my opinion, played a historic role as a former trustee with Anson Tech and then the new South Piedmont Community College. Some of you may recall that Senator Tommy Tucker colorfully described Mr. Raye’s remarkable leadership during that period when he swore him into this Board. That was a difficult transition for Anson and Union counties, and it would not have been as successful without Mr. Raye’s dedicated, committed leadership on behalf of his community, his college and the students.

Lynn didn’t have to put himself out that way, but he did. Not because he had to or because anyone would think any less of him if he hadn’t been here today, but he put himself out because that’s what leaders do.

For those of us who work at the System Office and at our local colleges, the leadership and efforts demonstrated by our Board members and trustees inspire us when we sometimes start to feel weary from the challenges we face. I think about that frequently when I see Dr. Linwood Powell showing up all over the place, or when I see Representative Jimmie Ford at what seems like every community college student event happening in the state.

I vividly recall feeling a little sorry for myself about having to attend a late afternoon meeting at Guilford Tech several years ago. But while I was parking my car, I saw George Regan, Chair of the Board at Robeson Community College, walking across the parking lot in Greensboro to attend the same meeting. That
image of George, who had had taken time off from work and driven all that way from Lumberton to attend the same meeting, quickly corrected my point of view that day.

So being reminded again last week at the Trustees’ meeting of the vital role that our trustees and State Board members play in making our community college system what it is today, I am also reminded that you do not in any way receive the recognition you deserve for the leadership you provide, and the countless hours you dedicate to these volunteer roles. You do that for our students, for your communities, and for your state, and I think that it is important for you to hear that your selfless leadership is recognized and greatly appreciated by all of us at the System Office, our Presidents, our faculty, staff and students. Your names may not be known to all of them, but the impact of your leadership is felt across all 58.

With that being said, I thought it was very fitting that at last week’s Trustee meeting one of North Carolina’s super community college trustees, Lyn Austin, was recognized for her selection as this year’s ACCT Trustee of the Year for the Southeast region. Lyn, who is now chair of the NC Association of Community College Trustees and long-time Chair at Johnston Community College, is a mainstay at our meetings, a champion for our causes, and a great leader locally and statewide. We join the entire community college family in applauding Lyn’s work and her well-deserved recognition as a star among community college leaders nationwide.