As most of you know, Dr. Scott Ralls established a tradition of making these reports narratives of student success stories gathered from our 58 community colleges, those he called, “heroes in the hallways”. I enjoyed reading Dr. Ralls’ well-written stories, and I logged on to the system website each month to read the next installment. Plenty of student success material remains and, in fact, grows daily for me to continue that tradition, and, from time to time during this interim period, I will.

I do not intend to make my reports the sort that are normally delivered at city council and county commissioner meetings where the managers often give itineraries of their activities since the last meeting.

So, in short, you will be getting a mixture of information, stories, activities and items of interest and note, but for today, I would like to talk a few minutes about heroes in our midst who are not students.

Chairman Shook and I had the honor last week of meeting with the North Carolina Association of Community College Trustees. Over 400 trustees from our colleges attended the organization’s 2015 Leadership Seminar in Wilmington. Also in attendance were two of our Board members, Dr. Breeden Blackwell and Mr. Jimmie Ford.

I have often felt that our System’s trustees are not given enough credit for their contributions to their individual colleges and to the system at large. Like you as members of the State Board, they give their time and talents without compensation in order to provide fiduciary guidance to those of us who have the good fortune to professionally lead.

Their greatest responsibility is to hire and evaluate the performance of their local college presidents. But they also have a legal responsibility, heavily emphasized in the work 25 year ago of the Commission on the Future, to ensure that
meaningful strategic planning occurs at their colleges accompanied by equally meaningful oversight and evaluation of year-to-year performance of how well their colleges are meeting their mission and declared goals.

These trustees also are significant connectors between their colleges and the communities they serve. Indeed, for their respective colleges, they serve as eyes and ears of the general citizenry because, while the president may be a relative newcomer, many of the trustees are life-long residents. They also reach out to county commissioners for adequate local support for the operation of their facilities and often, as has been the case this year, reach out to members of the General Assembly as we seek support for our System’s instructional and budget priorities. During past state bond campaigns that included community colleges, these trustees have played a pivotal role in rallying support from their communities.

Just like the State Board, membership of these local boards rotate over time. I met many newly appointed trustees at this meeting but also renewed friendships with a number of trustees who have served for decades. By the way, two of those new trustees recently served on this Board. Mr. James Woody is now a member of the Board of Trustees at Piedmont Community College, and Dr. Linwood Powell is continuing his work on the Board at Fayetteville Technical Community College. Most notably, I want to recognize Helen Boyette from James Sprunt Community College who has continuously served as a trustee for 48 years.

I offer my congratulations to Dr. Donny Hunter and his staff who have dramatically built the NCACCT into a dynamic organization, which is nationally recognized for a strong program of professional training and development for its membership.

In this first report, I also want to add my recognition of Dr. Ralls for the courageous leadership he provided to our System for seven years as we approached and celebrated our 50th anniversary and began our next 50 years. Through the development and implementation of SuccessNC and the development and launch of Align4NCWorks, Dr. Ralls challenged our System to embrace changes not seen since the Commission on the Future’s recommendations 25 years ago.
Some of these changes have not been universally popular. Significant change rarely is.

Yet, no one can honestly question that these changes were navigated and guided by our System’s core values:

- That our major goal is to improve the chances for our students to achieve success.
- That we would continue our commitment to the “open door” rather than move to selective admissions in order to improve our performance measures.
- That we would improve our performance measures without sacrificing the quality of our programs or those outcomes.
- That we would make changes based on performance data rather than on well-intentioned hunches about what might work better.
- That we would make changes with the full involvement of faculty, staff and leadership throughout the System and not just here at the System Office.
- That we would continuously evaluate the results of these initiatives and try something else if these changes do not achieve the desired results.

Scott Ralls loved to interact with students. It was what drove him back to a community college campus and was his version of “dancing with the stars,” particularly those students who achieved their dreams while overcoming what appeared to be impossible obstacles. But, Dr. Ralls was also willing to dance with some porcupines, which, I’m sure, he frequently had to do as we moved into the difficult process of significant systemic change.

While that work continues, and will receive my full attention as interim president, Dr. Ralls constantly reminded us that our System exists, first and foremost, to offer meaningful opportunities for all North Carolinians to improve their lives and those of their children.

Like Dr. Dallas Herring, who also danced with his generation’s porcupines to successfully create what our System has become, Dr. Ralls believed that our obligation extends to all—no matter where they live, no matter their past academic or life successes or failures.
In Dr. Ralls’ keynote address at our 50th anniversary celebration, he reminded us that we all stand on the shoulders of what he labeled as “audacious pioneers”, leaders who dared to be so naïve as to imagine that access to higher education could be open to all North Carolinians. In recognizing those audacious leaders, he cited not only Dr. Herring but many others including Governor Luther Hodges, Governor Terry Sanford, and Governor and System President Bob Scott.

I predict that on some anniversary occasion in the future, Dr. Scott Ralls will be on that list of audacious leaders. We are all fortunate that we had him as a leader and a friend. I join in the chorus who have thanked him for his service, wish him well in his work at Northern Virginia Community College, and await his planned return to North Carolina when his sojourn in the Commonwealth of Virginia is finished.

In the interim, we will keep recognizing our heroes, our stars; we will dance with porcupines as needed; and we will work together during this period of transition to ensure our next leader has the opportunity to also be audacious.