I have frequently noted that I began my tenure as President of the North Carolina Community College System the day the great recession started. If not technically correct, I was pretty darn close, and for much of my time in this position, we have wrestled with the combined impact of the greatest budget challenges and the largest enrollment spikes in our System’s history.

A phrase I coined in those early years – as much as a reminder and encouragement to myself – was that our greatest challenge was not to be defined by our challenges but by the opportunities we could impact. In other words, the Great Recession prompted a “new normal” so to speak, and I felt we couldn’t spend all our time bemoaning the budget issues hoping for normality return. Instead we had to embrace the changes thrust upon us and try to define our own future.

So in my first President’s report in April of 2008, I outlined ten potential opportunities or strategic emphases for initial focus. Cleaning out my office, I found the old yellow cards that were printed with those emphases, and honestly, I was a little nervous to read through them – initially thinking I would be disappointed by what we had not accomplished.

Now don’t get me wrong, there is still plenty of work to be done and things I regret that we have yet to accomplish, but all in all I feel really good about what our community colleges have achieved in recent years. Something that is abundantly clear to me today, leaving after seven years in this position, is that the North Carolina Community College System is made up of some of the most resilient people and leaders, at all levels, that any organization could hope to have. The community college people of North Carolina are people who refuse to be defined by their challenges and instead embrace and attack the opportunities they can impact.

Seven years ago, we said we were a system that badly needed to foster “system simplification” so our colleges can be nimble and effective. That still remains very
true today, but we are much more simple and efficient today in our program approval and accountability processes thanks to incredibly hard work by several great community college leaders. We gained significant cost savings through statewide contracts for testing, and we accomplished innovation economies of scale with the Learning Objects Repository, Virtual Computing Environment, Financial Aid Simplification Initiative and the development of a statewide advanced analytics system with our great SAS partners, all of which provide roadmaps for further opportunity.

We said seven years ago that we needed to enhance completion rates and bridges between programs. While we won’t know our impact on bottom line graduation for several years, I think it is safe to say that there is no community college system in the nation that has collectively attempted to do more in recent years to improve program completion rates than ours. That fact was accentuated earlier this month when the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee invited our System and Georgia State University as the two higher education representatives to testify on Opportunities to Improve Student Success in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

We said we needed to foster opportunities and clearer pathways for low-income students. Despite our budget challenges and some significant tuition increases, we have never tacked on any tuition increases beyond those legislatively enacted, and we have been able to maintain among the lowest community college tuition and fee rates in the nation. At the same time, we created new pathways of opportunity from high school to college through Career and College Promise, from training to certification to the workplace with JobsNOW and Back-to-Work initiatives, and from basic skills and high school equivalency programs to occupational certification with Basic Skills Plus.

We said we needed to expand health care programs and reenergize technical education programs. To do so, we completely changed the way we fund community colleges to prioritize these important high-cost, high-demand areas, and we redesigned 80 program degree areas to foster stackable certification models. Today, you don’t see nearly as many technical degrees on the annual program termination reports as was so common just a decade ago, and the number of credentials awarded in technician areas have increased 79% since 2008
and 30% for health sciences areas. We also completely redesigned our math courses so that they are contextually aligned with the programs and careers our students are pursuing. This past year we had a 7.7% increase in the number of students taking our credit math courses, the second year in a row we have had an increase in math enrollments while overall enrollment has declined.

We said we needed to develop a stronger training infrastructure and enhance economic development. We completely redesigned our customized training programs to enhance our flexibility to support existing companies, as well as our colleges’ capabilities to support advanced technologies. We developed entirely new models to train for industry certifications that can be integrated into degree programs, developed a strategic plan to promote alignment with our economic and workforce partners, and conducted the largest on-site employer survey in North Carolina in just 100 days.

We said we needed to enhance 2+2 partnerships and promote economies of scale with our education partners. We brought back dual enrollment opportunities from drastic recession-caused reductions to a new Career and College Promise program that promotes pathways from our public schools to community colleges. We completely revamped our Comprehensive Articulation Agreement to enable, for the first time, course guarantees from all 58 community colleges to all 16 UNC colleges. With our great university partners, we initiated the first reverse transfer program, new statewide articulation agreements in engineering and nursing, and, next week, we will sign a newly revamped articulation agreement with North Carolina’s independent and private colleges.

We said we wanted to foster community college champions and increase community college awareness. Our success in those efforts is subjective, and I believe our great system deserves many more true champions than it currently has. But the appreciation of the remarkable work of our colleges allowed us to achieve over $100 million dollars in enrollment growth funding in a single year, foster what is now $24 million in performance funding, achieve the first weighted funding in our System’s history for technical education, obtain recurring appropriations for the minority male mentoring program, significantly increase equipment funding, get a toe-hold on year-round funding which we hope will be solidified at the close of this session, and plow savings we generated from
developmental education redesign into health care and technical education programs through our “Closing the Skills Gap Initiative” which Governor McCrory helped us champion. While the sum of those accomplishments may not lead to the perception that we’ve been winning the legislative battles, in the context of our relative performance during difficult overall state budget years, I definitely don’t believe that we have been losing.

In fact, all of these things we accomplished in the past seven years have been during the period when we stared down and aggressively dealt with the most challenging budget cuts and student demand in our more than 50-year system history. During this period, I feel proud to say we have been defined by our opportunities and not by our challenges.

Now why did we do this? Not because of leadership from the top-down but because of resiliency throughout. Community college people are a gritty, hardy bunch. And during an era of participation trophies, selfies, get-rich-quick schemes, celebrity reality shows and throw-away consumerism, I believe what our society needs now more than ever is some good old-fashioned grit and hardiness.

The kind of grit and determination modeled by Stella Galyean, a mountain girl who was married into an abusive relationship at the age of 13 after having grown up in a home marked by her mother’s drug abuse. Stella, a sixth-grade dropout, could have blamed her circumstances in life, but instead enrolled in the GED program at A-B Tech and earned a certificate in Substance Abuse Studies. After facing all she had to this point, nobody would have blamed Stella, the mother of five children, for taking a woe-is-me attitude when she developed cervical cancer. But she shrugged that off as well, on her way to graduating with honors last May with an Associate in Arts, president of A-B Tech’s Phi Theta Kappa honor society, a Coca-Cola Silver Scholar, All-USA Community College Academic Team, and our System’s 2015 Dallas Herring Award recipient. This year she is a transfer student at East Tennessee State University.

When people like Stella Galyean walk through your hallways and enter your classrooms, you can’t sit around and snuffle or complain because the budget negotiations didn’t totally break your way.
So as I wrap up my last President’s Report, I am reminded of lessons I learned from the Marine Generals who used to guest lecture for me during the leadership course I taught while at Craven Community College. They would quiz the students to see how many famous Marine Generals they could name. Even in a Marine-savvy community, the students had difficulty doing so – Marine Generals rarely gain name recognition, which led to the Generals’ point. In some organizations – like the Marines and I would say, the North Carolina Community College System -- the organization’s resiliency demanded that the “next leader” would simply step up. Their comrades will rally around them. Their goals will get accomplished and the hills, as it were, taken. As I exit out, I have absolutely no doubt that this System and its resilient people and leaders will step up and step forward, and when they do, I’ll be on the sidelines, cheering them on.