

President of the North Carolina Community College System
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

“Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act: Opportunities to Improve Student Success”

August 5, 2015

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and members of the committee, my name is Scott Ralls and I am President of the North Carolina Community College System, transitioning in one month to become President of Northern Virginia Community College.

In October of 2009, state and local community college leaders met in Fayetteville, North Carolina and declared student success the strategic focus of the North Carolina Community College System. Designed to be more dynamic than a strategic plan, the effort, billed as *SuccessNC*, began as a nine-month listening-and-learning tour to all 58 community colleges in the state and led to what some outside observers labeled as a culture shift in our system. Five years later, *SuccessNC* resulted in a series of statewide programmatic reforms and initiatives that impact student success at scale across 58 community colleges.

These programmatic reforms included:

- Redesign of statewide dual enrollment programs where students enroll in pathways rather than courses;
- Adult basic education programs integrated with developmental education and occupational skills certification;
- Overhaul of developmental education accelerating more students into college-level math and English courses;
- Restructuring 89 technical programs to enable the on-ramps and off-ramps of competency-based, stackable certifications, and math redesign to contextualize with workplace requirements;
- Complete overhaul of our statewide university articulation agreements enabling guaranteed course transfers for all community college transfers to the UNC System and most private universities in

our state, reverse transfer opportunities, and new cross-sector engineering and nursing pathways; and

- Statewide performance outcome measures and funding tied to key student success metrics, and new data systems, advanced analytic tools, and professional development across community colleges.

The combined implementation of these efforts is still relatively new and the outcomes yet to be evaluated once we are a few more years down the road, and while we have changed many programs with good intentions, we certainly haven't found educational nirvana nor figured out everything yet.

However, a number of lessons and principles have emerged during this six-year journey - ways in which our thinking has been influenced - and lessons that perhaps may contribute to ideas as you approach the important reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

First, we know students are more likely to find success when they continuously progress along coherent curriculum pathways. This is a key reason for our current push for year-round state funding in North Carolina, an effort that has been championed by Governor Pat McCrory and key legislative leaders, and one where we have already obtained partial success. Community college students eager to move into or progress in the workforce, or on to a university, are not looking to take a summer vacation. Their forward movement often needs to be accelerated, not slowed, and that is why we believe the provision of year-round Pell grants is so fundamental to accelerating student success.

Second, we know students are more likely to find success when they start with the end in mind, and have outcome milestones along the way. That is why the emphasis on outcomes and accountability is so important in the Higher Education Act reauthorization. However, it is vital that more attention be given to measures that appropriately measure institutional impact on student success. Less than one-third of the students enrolling in our North Carolina Community colleges are included in the current IPEDS graduation cohort. Those many students who leave us without an academic credential, but with valued industry credentials leading to a job, or successful transfer to a university leading to a bachelor's degree, are currently not considered as successes based on the Federal definition.

Where possible, the Higher Education Act should provide resources, funding and technical assistance to respond to performance-based funding systems, create the facilitating infrastructure that facilitates measuring and tracking of student success, and streamline other institutional reporting requirements.

Third and relatedly, we know the success goal many of our students pursue is a skill and a job. Their incomes and family responsibilities require them to quickly improve their job standing, which is why we have gone to such great lengths in North Carolina to integrate and articulate short-term training opportunities leading to valued industry certifications into the structure of our applied associate degrees – what is often referred to as stackable certification. This means students can gain highly valued industry credentials in demand areas such as information technology, welding, health care and machining and enter the workplace with a higher paying job, while continuing their pursuit of a post-secondary credential with credit for their previous short-term training.

Authorizing institutions to include short-term training programs in their Pell Grant-eligible portfolio would be an important step to both closing the skills gap and fully recognizing the breadth of post-secondary student success

*Fourth, we know that most of our student pathways to success run **through** our institutions, they don't begin and end there, and students' personal pathways aren't typically confined to single institutions.* We have to be willing to embrace the reality of “student swirl”, but be diligent in creating more coherent pathways across institutions and educational sectors, which is why tight, structured collaborations across educational partners are so important.

Community colleges are uniquely positioned, in this regard, as what I like to refer to as the “seam in seamless education.” Wherever possible, I believe, Federal policy and legislation should encourage and incentivize implementation of dual enrollment pathways tightly connected with public schools, and strong statewide articulation agreements between community colleges and universities. Creation of a federal unit record system for Title IV eligible institutions would move us forward accounting for the reality of students moving across multiple institutions.

Finally, we know that what is important in the end is the number of successes we collectively help produce, not just the percentages within our individual institutions. Success must be attained through widely available opportunity, which is why both simplification and access are so vital to any focus on student success. Over two-thirds of community college students today come from the bottom half of the income brackets. We know the harsh realities of their struggles with both complexity and affordability. That is why the increased call for simplifying and improving student financial aid is so important, and if made a reality, will play an important role in furthering student success.

It is also why our sector applauds the goals of the America's College Promise Act, which notes not only the unique role of America's community colleges, but more importantly makes the bold point that accessible postsecondary education beyond high school is today a necessity for family sustaining incomes.

In conclusion, we know that America's community colleges today have to be more than just a gateway to the American dream, we have to build clearer, more direct pathways to those dreams. Your consideration of these points in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act will help clear some obstacles from those pathways of opportunity.

Thank you.