

Testimony of Dr. Scott Ralls, President of Wake Technical Community College  
To the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

*COVID-19 Recovery: Supporting Workers and Modernizing the Workforce  
Through Quality Education, Training and Employment Opportunities*  
April 20, 2021

Good morning Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr and members of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. I am honored to be with you today. My name is Scott Ralls and I am President of Wake Technical Community College. Serving approximately 70,000 individuals per year with six campuses and three training sites in the Greater Raleigh metropolitan region, our college is not only the largest community college in our state but also one of the largest higher education institutions in North Carolina.

As a community college, we take particular pride in the “community” part of our name, and this challenging past year has sharpened even more our community emphasis. We have been privileged and honored to help provide a bridge to recovery for the students and community we serve.

A year ago this month, we quickly moved every course and service we provide online, and since that time we have been safely nudging back to normalcy. A majority of our students work -- you could say that colleges like ours are the colleges of “essential workers” -- and our role in that regard was clear, with the physical reopening of both our Public Safety and Health Sciences Campuses last June. Since that time, 136 Wake Tech nursing graduates moved to the healthcare frontlines with the aid of a new “graduate nurse status” designation by the North Carolina Board of Nursing, and our pharmacy tech students and faculty have received special training for vaccine administration. In August, we began bringing back our skilled trades and technical programs into socially distanced, in-person courses in our shops and labs, and we hustled to ensure that all our faculty had a completed a unique on-line instruction certification program called EPIC that we created a few years ago, not knowing how vital it would be to us this year.

Like all community colleges, our students are more likely to come from working and lower income families, and also to be classified as non-traditional. This year was a particularly non-traditional year for them – the working student who also is the essential clerk in the grocery checkout line, the student parent who is also serving as a teacher at home. To address their greater challenges, we have attempted to amplify all of our communications, accelerate and expand our student supports, and serve where we can as a lifeline for our community under a college mantra we have called “Reach and Rally.”

At the onset of the pandemic, we reached out with an outbound calling campaign to check in on each of our students and revamped delivery of our vital tutoring services. In the Fall, we waived all of our student fees to give our students a financial break, and as of this week, we will have distributed emergency financial aid to over 12,000 students at an average award

amount of \$700, provided \$125 grocery gift cards to over 4,300 students, and distributed over 1,200 free student laptops.

While reaching out to our students, we rallied around our community as well. At the onset of the pandemic, we collected all of our existing PPE, donating 74,000 gloves, 3,000 masks, hundreds of bottles of sanitizer and our only ventilator to our local hospitals. We also raised \$192,000 in private funds to be distributed as “rally grants” to 85 local small businesses that had started in recent years with the assistance of our Wake Tech small business programs. Today, one of our campus gyms is a site where 1,800 people a week are receiving COVID vaccinations.

As we have reached the one-year COVID-19 anniversary, we are extremely grateful for the Federal, State and County resources, as well as the private donations during a record setting fundraising year, that enabled us to earn our stripes this year as our community’s college. While we are keeping our eye on the ball with respect to all safety protocols, we are excited to be reaching a transition point where our support becomes focused on economic and workforce recovery.

In no way is this a new role for our college. Workforce development that enables broadly-shared economic prosperity has always been at the heart of our mission, and in the year leading up to the pandemic, we were already framing our role as our region’s largest “ladder college” and furthering the practice of what we sometimes refer to as “ladder economics.” Here’s briefly what we mean by that and what it looks like.

First a glimpse into the region we serve, the Research Triangle. Our region is a high-tech hub, blessed by economic opportunity, population growth, and trailing only Austin, Texas in STEM job growth over the past decade. Our region can be found at the top of most positive economic indicators, and higher education has been at the core of our region’s economic development, with strong universities serving as a talent magnet for individuals from around the country.

However, we have not been as strong a talent ladder. Economic analyses indicate that despite the richness of opportunities, we lag as an economic ladder, meaning if you grow up poor as a child in our region, the chances of remaining poor as an adult are higher than in many other metropolitan areas. We know that significant challenge has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Defining ourselves as our region’s largest ladder college, Wake Tech has taken it on as our unique mission to change that, and thus a focus on “ladder economics.”

Here’s what we mean. Prior to the pandemic, you could hear the debate in many places about skills vs. degrees. I’ve personally had several corporate executives tell me they don’t care about degrees anymore, only skills, and then later learn that the memo never reached the HR department where degrees were very much a criteria for potential promotions. Why should an individual have to choose? Training often leads to the necessary skills required to land a job, but too often does not connect to the degree pathways necessary for career promotion – like a ladder with only the bottom rungs. On the flip side, many higher education degree pathways are like a ladder with only the top rungs, unreachable to many people who need to work so they can continue higher education to prepare for a career.

Skills vs. degrees, the workforce system vs. the education system, short-term vs. long-term – our workforce development deliberations have too often been focused around the debates of “or,” while so many people need us to be focused around “and.” Our conversations and plans

should be more about connective ladders to opportunity, less about disconnected siloed programs, and that's where "ladder economics" comes in.

Ladder economics means fostering a focus on each important rung of the career ladder and the partnerships that create the vital connectivity. In my opinion, the important rungs of ladder economics include:

- frequent and meaningful employer engagement,
- data-infused career development,
- training opportunities providing both a *foothold* to a job with recognized industry certifications and *foothold* to degrees with prior learning credit,
- coordinated high school pathways through CTE and dual enrollment,
- well-developed apprenticeship and work-based learning opportunities,
- stackable community college degrees,
- second chance recovery efforts,
- strategic university articulations, and
- *plus-up* training for degree holders that fosters meaningful career-based, lifetime learning.

These ladder rungs are not unique to most community college programs, and at Wake Tech, we are sharpening our focus on each rung and the partnerships – employer partnerships, educational partnerships, workforce system partnerships – that form the vital planks that connect the rungs of the ladder together.

Three of the vital rungs fall within the realm of outreach and information. Perhaps the most vital outreach is active employer engagement which we continuously cultivate so as to hit employer skills targets and give our students a hiring advantage. Like most community colleges, each of our applied degree programs have active employer advisory committees and it is a rare day when I am not personally engaged with at least one local employer regarding workforce development.

Data science is opening the development of two new ladder rungs related to career development and stop-out recovery. With the data science company, Burning Glass, we have initiated career mapping for each of our degree pathways which will provide up-to-date regional wage and employment data for students and potential students regarding what is possible with each credential step. We also innovated our own data science tool, Finish First, which allows us to identify at the course level, the degree award proximity of all our recent stop-outs, which we also hope to connect back to the career maps. By coordinating that information this past spring with a targeted student outreach effort with the company Inside Track, we were able to foster a stop-out recovery effort that was 50% more effective than our normal outreach and had a 343% return on investment. The model is now being piloted statewide in North Carolina with the assistance of the North Carolina Community College System, the UNC System, Lumina Foundation and the John M. Belk Endowment.

Much of the work of what we call ladder economics revolves around programmatic alignment – alignment of high school dual enrollment opportunities, short-term training and prior learning credit, applied degrees, and strategic university transfer options – and the notion of credential "stackability." In North Carolina we have an advantage, as our North Carolina Community College System revamped the statewide applied degree structure almost a decade ago with a major goal to foster opportunity through credential stackability.

And through our laddering goals at Wake Tech, we are attempting to take the concepts of program alignment and stackability to new levels. Here are a couple of examples in job areas that have continued to boom in growth in our region even during the height of the pandemic: Biotech and IT.

The pandemic has spurred the exponential growth of biotech jobs in our region with major jobs and investment announcements becoming a common occurrence as exemplified by the recent company announcements from Fujifilm Diosynth Biotechnologies, Biogen, and Eli Lilly to name just a few. A gateway to the entry jobs for many of those companies is our short-term, non-degree BioWork program, a statewide community college program developed years ago in close partnership with our biotech companies. BioWork is now offered as one of 21 programs provided free of charge at our college to individuals facing employment impacts of COVID, thanks to Federal GEER funding made available by the CARES Act. Students in that program get a strong foothold to a first job in biotech, and also a foothold through prior learning credit into our two-year Biopharmaceutical Technology degree. For high school students at our Vernon Malone College and Career Academy, one of our three Early College partnerships we share with Wake County Public Schools, students there have an accelerated dual enrollment jump start, with several finishing our biopharmaceutical technology degree and other programs at the same time they graduate from high school.

Students who complete our biopharmaceutical technology degree can seamlessly transfer that degree and the credits into the Bachelor of Science in Industrial Technology degree at East Carolina University, and the UNC System recently approved the onsite delivery of that program by ECU on our Wake Tech campuses. Finally, once the entry level skills and degrees are attained, further skills-focused lifetime learning is needed, what we sometimes call “plus-up training.” That is where our BioNetwork Capstone Center comes in, a unique training center Wake Tech operates for the North Carolina Community College System. Located within the Biomanufacturing Training and Education Center on the Centennial Campus of our close partner, NC State University, it offers a “biotech teaching factory” where we offer “plus-up” training in areas like clean room operations, Good Manufacturing Practices, validation and instrumentation.

Let me switch to another high demand opportunity in our region, information technology, where job openings have grown 20% year over year since January 2020. We now call our short-term IT offerings, “Power Packs,” because like BioWork, they provide the ultimate in foothold short-term training programs -- accelerated training like a boot camp that results in in-demand industry certifications, but also the power of prior learning credit for our multiple information technology degrees. And like BioWork, our PowerPack IT programs are currently offered to many individuals free of charge thanks to the Federal GEER funding.

Here’s a practical example of the power of the ladder model in IT -- a student at Wake Tech can take a non-degree, accelerated short-term program in software development using Python. That short-term program opens the door to immediate potential employment opportunities in our region, as well as prior learning credit to our computer programming, cybersecurity and cloud infrastructure degrees. Those degrees are stackable, leading to additional industry recognized credentials, such as the IBM Blockchain Badge which was the first IBM badge offered outside of the IBM system. We have also fostered strategic university articulations for each of our IT degrees and over the past two years established seamless 2+2 pathways in computer programming and cybersecurity degrees with North Carolina A&T, UNC Charlotte, ECU, NC Central and Northeastern University out of Boston, where our students have been able to participate in virtual coop experiences this year. Through our very

affordable non-degree programs, funded by our state at the same level as our degree programs, and our stackable certificate models, students with degrees have a valuable resource for IT plus-up training. A great example is our Business Analytics Certificate which we have specially aligned to employer defined knowledge skills and abilities through our participation in the Business Roundtable Workforce Partnership Initiative (WPI). Recently, half of our students enrolled in that certificate program had bachelor's degrees and 15% had master's degrees or higher.

Finally, one of the most important rungs we believe in ladder economics is work-based learning and apprenticeship. Thanks to funding from Wake County, we are doubling down on these opportunities as our county is funding a Wake Tech program we call WakeWorks to facilitate employers in becoming registered, and provide the tuition and other expense needs of apprentices gaining their related training through Wake Tech. The recent story of one of our computer programming students demonstrates the great power of work-based learning as a vital rung in the economic ladder model. Tiffany Harrell grew up as a foster youth in Eastern North Carolina and came to Wake Tech for the first time many years ago when she earned her GED. Lacking additional money for college at the time, she left school and was married. One day, her husband suddenly died of a heart attack leaving Tiffany a widow with five kids and no job. However, with natural computing instincts and a ton of desire, Tiffany made her way back to Wake Tech and into our computer programming degree program. Not long afterwards came an opportunity through our work-based learning partnership with Lenovo, where she thrived and was eventually awarded a full-time job. Today, Tiffany works as a Team Lead with the North American ThinkAgile Premier Support Team at Lenovo. Should she want to further ladder into an IT bachelor's degree with one of our strategic university partners, while continuing to work, those further opportunities now also await her, and I have no doubt she will be successful.

To conclude, for non-traditional students like Tiffany, traditional college degree pathways are too often inaccessible while isolated skills training programs and boot camps are insufficient. America's community colleges are the at the heart of the potential for ladder economics because they are the natural places where employer and educational partnerships abound, career ladders are constructed, and students like Tiffany Harrell thrive.

There are several opportunities for Congress and the Federal Government to further the development of meaningful career ladders at America's community colleges by among other things:

- Extending Federal Financial Aid eligibility to students and workers enrolled in short-term programs, particularly when those programs are third-party assessed, lead to meaningful industry certifications, and articulate into academic degree credit;
- Authorizing a community college-led job training program that provides meaningful funding for the development and initiation of career ladders in high demand job areas where the instructional expenses are also more costly;
- Establishing education and training innovation funds at the Departments of Labor and Education, and incentivizing creative laddering partnerships between the WIOA system, high school CTE programs, and community colleges; and
- Strengthening Federal Apprenticeship policies that foster alignment with educational ladders including competency-based programs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing and I look forward to the discussion generated by your questions.