

**President's Report to the State Board of Community Colleges**  
**Dr. R. Scott Ralls**  
***Friday, February 20, 2009***

Two things stand out about the current recession, sometimes being referred to as the "Great **R**ecession". First, it is the deepest and likely the longest in our lifetimes. And second, it is having a significant impact on North Carolinians. The Wall Street Journal recently noted that for the three-month period from October to December, North Carolina experienced the greatest swing in the unemployment rate of any state in the nation. Our community colleges know that well as their doors have been swinging with record Spring enrollments to the point where they are about to come off their hinges.

Something else of note is that this is a global recession as evidenced by last week's statement from Dennis Blair, the new National Intelligence Director, declaring that instability caused by the global economic crisis is now the biggest security threat to the United States, ahead of terrorism. The International Monetary Fund predicts that by year end, global economic growth will be at its lowest point since the Great **D**epression.

And as the most globalized recession we have experienced, recovery from this recession will be the first to take place in a truly global marketplace where our competition coming out will not just be with Virginia, South Carolina and Michigan, but with Singapore, Ireland and South Korea. Economic competition will be particularly fierce, and even before we entered this economic crisis, we were facing strong signs of trouble with respect to global education competition.

In the United States, our public school students go to school approximately 20 days less than the rest of the industrialized world, and our students are the only ones of any industrialized nation that are anticipated to have lower educational attainment than their parents. In many of our competitor nations, approximately 50% of college students are majoring in STEM disciplines compared to only 16% here. And in the world of technical education, countries like Singapore and China are making huge

investments in new technical education systems while many of our labs haven't seen a new piece of equipment in decades.

A visiting instructor from China, currently teaching at one of our community colleges, recently made this sobering observation:

"I found that students are less motivated in learning than arguing for their scores. Many of them tend to miss as many lectures as possible, as long as they can pass . . . This is very different from the students I have in China, who record many of the lectures they attend and listen to them again. The college libraries in China, whatever college, are always full. What I mean is something seems to have to be done to let the students realize that they are the most blessed people in the world, and their generational counterparts are struggling for survival in North Korea, fighting in the street in the Middle East and starving in Africa. If America is continue to lead, these students will face fierce competition, not from their peers around them, but from the young people from India, Singapore, China, Thailand, Korea, and Japan, and recently, Vietnam."

A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege of having dinner with Ken Livingstone, former Mayor of London, prior to the Emerging Issues Forum, and he noted that based on his recent travels and observations, that the youth of China are also very focused on changing the framework in their country regarding environmental efficiency and sustainability. For China to grow at its previous pace, and for them to overcome the pollution issues that we all were able to witness in the Olympics, things will have to change in China, something that Mr. Livingstone noted the youth of China were demanding.

And for us to emerge out of this economic recession with the type of economic opportunity we hope for our youth and children, things may have to change here as well. We cannot hope to just stimulate our way through this problem; we may have to "reboot" as Thomas Friedman has recently said. That may mean studying more,

teaching and working differently, as well as saving and investing more wisely to compete in a world of global competition.

That is why initiatives like "Code Green" that you learned about yesterday are important, and I am proud that many of our presidents will gather this weekend to put their shoulder to the wheel in furthering system wide efforts to make our campuses sustainable, and to prepare our students to compete with the skills required by an economy demanding greater energy efficiency. It is why it is important that we celebrate the innovation and efforts of our Excellent Small Business Center Award recipients today, whose work is too often unnoticed in moving North Carolina's economy forward toward prosperity.

One thing we know about America, and it is certainly the case for North Carolina, is that while we may be down, we will get back up. And thank goodness the North Carolina Community College System is here to help with the lifting. I am confident we will get up because of the spirit we find at many of our community colleges today. It is a spirit I observed a couple of weeks ago when, along with Dr. Steve Scott, President of Wake Tech, and Chancellor Holden Thorpe, Chancellor of UNC-Chapel Hill, I was able to have lunch with the C-Step students at Wake Tech. C-Step is a program that provides low-income students from Wake Tech, Alamance Community College, and Durham Tech the opportunity to move from community college to UNC Chapel Hill. Last week, a *News and Observer* editorial referred to the program as "...an example of how offering a chance to individuals can return it many fold to the state that provided it."

One by one, as the C-STEP students introduced themselves at lunch, their gratitude for their opportunity was overflowing, and Chancellor Thorpe noted on his blog later that they were the "thankigest" group of students he had been around. The next day, he mentioned to me how gratifying it was to be with a group of students who wanted it so much and had such deep appreciation for their opportunity.

That sprit of wanting it, exemplified by the C-Step students, our Small Business Center award winners, and our "Code Green" Presidents is what will carry us through these tough times. It is exemplified by the story of one of the recent C-Step participants, Giovanni Pulaj, who as a teenager fled Albania to escape their Civil War and came to the United States to pursue a better way of life. For an extended period of time, Giovanni was homeless and lived out of his car. He then found a place to live, and he worked full-time while attending Durham Tech. He was accepted into C-STEP after graduating from Durham Tech's University Transfer program. He will soon graduate on-time from UNC-Chapel Hill with a 4.0 GPA in Mathematics.

So when it seems that all the news you hear is bad and when you grow tired of looking at the depressing numbers, here's a little secret I have found to keep your spirits up and give you confidence in our future. Go to our web page at [www.nccreatingsuccess.org](http://www.nccreatingsuccess.org). There you will find a number of Giovanni-like stories of folks who found their success created with the hope, opportunity and job preparation provided through our community colleges. I guarantee it will put a spring in your step and make you proud to be connected to the North Carolina Community College System.