

# **State Board of Community Colleges**

## ***President's Report***

Dr. R. Scott Ralls

*Friday, September 18, 2009*

Come mid-August, students around the nation, from kindergarten to college-age, begin a new academic year, and at many of our 58 North Carolina community colleges from Tri-County to College of the Albemarle, a record number of new students are turning to us for hope, opportunity and jobs. These students best exemplify the purpose for which we do our work which is why, over the past year in my reports, I have always included student stories.

This year we have a new batch of stories walking through our doors – the “heroes in the hallways” I liked to call them when I was a community college president. In Wilmington, for example, seven students who have been residents of a local homeless shelter are enrolled this semester after being inspired by Lori Pacheco, a fellow shelter resident and USA Today Academic Award recipient who graduated last year from Cape Fear Community College with a 4.0 grade point average after overcoming a lifetime of hard knocks, misfortunes and homelessness.

These student stories, like Lori's and her shelter mates, resonate so much with those of us around this table, I believe, for either one of two reasons. First, some of you may have been like so many of our students – the first in your family to go to college, the path-maker, the obstacle jumper, the trailblazer who set the example for others in your family to follow Or secondly, you may be like me, someone who was not far behind a trailblazer whose life sacrifices made a difference for you and your family today.

In my family, that person was my grandfather. When I was younger, he took me way, way back into the mountains of Tennessee to show me the grave of our ancestor, a Scotch-Irishman who based on my recollections of my grandfather's story, came to the United States in less than an officially sanctioned way.

My grandfather's family multiplied in the Smoky Mountains where they lived and worked until the sawmills disappeared. Then, seeking new opportunity they collectively loaded up their belongings to head to South Carolina to look for work in textiles.

As a youth, my grandfather had to quit school in the eighth grade to also work in the textile mill, and, although his personal education was limited, it was his trailblazing passion for educational opportunity that I believe was a catalyst for the opportunities I have today and that my children will have tomorrow. For it was my grandfather, a man with no opportunity to go to high school, who made sure that each of his children, including my mother, had the opportunity to go to college. I think about my grandfather this time of year when I watch my own children, including his namesake, head off to their first few weeks of school.

Last year, many on this board had an opportunity to meet one of those trailblazing family path-makers when we visited Asheboro and met Brenda Lopez, a class of '09 graduate of Randolph Community College. In her remarks to us, she described her feelings on her first day of school in the sixth grade:

"Most students are anxious to go to school on their first day. But, can you imagine going to your first day of school in sixth grade and not being able to communicate with your teachers or your classmates? Not being able to ask your teacher if you can drink some water because you can't speak her language?"

Brenda found herself in this situation because her mother had chosen to leave Mexico in 2000 in search of a better life for herself and her 11 children. I can imagine that this transition may not have been Brenda's choosing, because I can remember how much of a fuss I kicked up about just having to move from Mt. Airy to Morganton at that same age.

But Brenda worked hard in school, and learned much, not only academics, but also, in her words, “Living in this country has taught me that education is the path towards a successful future.”

Brenda also found that her legal status would limit her hope for further educational opportunity, just as it had her 8 older siblings. But Brenda discovered that her father had been a migrant farmer at one time – opening a door that allowed her to pursue legal status. That was the beginning of the path she sought so, as only a high school senior, Brenda began tackling the challenges of becoming a legal citizen. And she made her dream happen.

She graduated last year with her Associates Degree from Randolph Community College, and, after having been accepted at three state universities, she enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she is pursuing a biology degree with the hope of one day becoming a dentist. Having met Brenda, I am quite confident that she is an asset to our state but she’s an even greater asset because of the education she has and will receive. Since meeting her and hearing her story, I have often wondered what would have been her fate if she had not gone to such extraordinary personal steps as a high school student to gain her legal status.

Each year, there are numerous students, like Brenda, graduating from our high schools unable to pursue the hope of continuing their education and the opportunity that comes with it, wherever that opportunity may eventually be for them. When our system’s ever-changing position on admissions allowed undocumented immigrants through our community college doors, the vast majority of those students were either North Carolina high school graduates or current North Carolina high school students taking dual enrollment programs. Because of their demonstrated interest in education and a better quality of life, I’m guessing that, if those students discovered a pathway to legal status like Brenda did, they would also go to great lengths to attain it.

But absent federal guidelines and policy or legal status, it is true that job opportunities for these undocumented students are legally limited. That's an argument that has been used against opening our educational doors. Another argument against admitting undocumented immigrants has focused on the cost to taxpayers. Under the policy you passed today, undocumented students will pay significantly more in out-of-state tuition than the annual cost of having them as a student. And what about displacing a legal resident in a classroom? You don't want that to happen any more than the folks against admission. Our mission is to North Carolinians first, and the policy you passed today reflects your intent to ensure that no legal resident will be displaced in a community college classroom.

You all came to your decision today after hearing concerns expressed from thoughtful individuals on both sides of this difficult issue, and this new policy places more restrictions on the admission of undocumented immigrants than those in several other states. But, in my opinion, it is a policy that is the right thing to do because it maintains that all-important hope for students who were brought to our country as minors and who are graduates of our high schools. It keeps the path to a better life clearly in view.

But, truthfully, our recent community college graduate, Brenda Lopez, now a university student, expressed it best when she talked about her own life goals:

"I want to be the role model that my two sisters need to look up to. I want my little sisters to have a successful future and to make our American dream a reality."