

Comments for the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Dr. R. Scott Ralls, President
NC Community College System
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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Alexander and members of the committee, my name is Scott Ralls, and I am President of the North Carolina Community College System. With 58 community colleges serving almost one of every eight adults in our state, we are one of the largest and most accessible systems of higher education in the country. Because our statewide, comprehensive student success efforts have been developed and implemented by the 58 colleges across our state, our efforts have sometimes been referred to as “innovation at scale”.

Four years ago this month, North Carolina community college leaders met at Fayetteville Technical Community College near Fort Bragg and declared student success to be the primary strategic focus of the North Carolina Community College System. It was not that student success had not always been a primary goal, but from that day forward it became the deliberate focus of our strategic planning, what we refer to as SuccessNC, and what is today a four-year effort that I believe is producing a culture shift among North Carolina community colleges.

At that initial meeting, we discussed the economic importance of ensuring more students attain their goals, which meant not just increasing the percentage of students who complete, but increasing the number of North Carolinians who achieve meaningful success points for employment and further education. Our leaders noted that our goals to significantly increase the numbers of credential completers could not be accomplished with any sacrifices to access or rigor, and it also meant a shift in focus beyond access, where we not only take note of how many students make it through our registration lines, but more importantly, how many students cross our graduation stages.

We decided that to discover the innovations and barriers to student success, it was best to listen to the experts –our faculty and staff at the front lines – and so for nine months our State Board members and System leaders traveled nearly 14,000 miles, attending listening sessions at all 58 of our colleges. From those sessions, we documented more than 200 college-based innovations and 75 barriers, and armed with that knowledge, as well as benchmarking from outside our state, we developed a comprehensive set of 15 statewide strategies to move the dial on student success and program completion, encompassed within a loss-momentum framework we adopted from our great supporters, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This framework and these strategies, as well as our college-based innovations, are documented in detail at our strategic planning web site, SuccessNC.org

As we are now deep into the implementation and execution of these statewide strategies, I cannot today tell you their ultimate impact, nor will I be able to for at least few more years, but I can tell you we see some positive initial signs. There is no doubt that the deliberate focus on student success efforts is today very different from what it was just four short years ago. Bearing that in mind, I will quickly share some of what I believe are our initial lessons learned.

First, rather than just providing general access to college courses, we see greater value for students in beginning early in structured program pathways that accelerate them towards meaningful goals. That has meant redesigning dual enrollment programs with our public school partners so that high school students enroll free-of-tuition in program pathways, not random courses, ensuring they take the right courses leading to degree completion, be it a technical degree or a bachelor's degree. Similarly, we restructured GED programs so that those students simultaneously receive the developmental education to become college-ready, while also picking up valuable technical skills for employment.

Second, with research and analysis enriched by our long-time partners, Jobs for the Future and the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, we have learned the value of identifying and mitigating momentum "loss" points, points where students become bogged down and too often are pulled off course in their goals toward completion. In community colleges, this typically happens early in their first semester or first academic year, particularly in developmental education programs, often the "Bermuda Triangle" for community college students where they remediate in high-school level work while enrolled in college to become prepared for college courses.

Like the Bermuda Triangle, we found too many students entering developmental education without exiting, which is why we have completely redesigned our efforts in North Carolina. First, by turning to expert math and English faculty across our state to reengineer our curriculum based on specific, well-defined competencies that both shorten overall course lengths while also enabling the modularization of courses, allowing students to quickly get the instruction they need. Also, rather than relying on high-stakes placement tests that we found were not very predictive of ultimate student success, we have contracted with the College Board to design a statewide test for us that is diagnostic of individual student math and English needs, based on the competencies our faculty identified, which with additional measures will better help us pinpoint student remedial requirements

We have also worked closely with our public school partners to align their career and college readiness testing efforts and new high school diploma endorsements with our developmental education reforms. For years, high schools in our state, as in most states, tested students for readiness using one educational standard, then students would graduate and come to us where we would test them using other educational standards, and in turn we would start approximately two-thirds of recent graduates back in high-school level developmental education courses. This lack of calibration of our educational measuring sticks has created tremendous wastes for both students and state resources over time, so alignment has been a major focus of our developmental education reforms.

As a third lesson, we believe it is particularly important to structure programs with meaningful educational on- and off-ramps. There are multiple credentials of value for today's college student – degrees, industry certifications, certificates, badges, etc., -- and realizing that two-thirds of today's college students are non-traditional also means they frequently exit and later re-enter our higher education systems. I believe many of the best designed programs take great steps to ensure students have something meaningful when they leave, and also that they can quickly articulate when they reenter or transition.

This was the general theory behind one of the largest faculty-led curriculum redesigns in our System's history, completed last year, what we call "Code Green," borrowed from a terminology coined by Thomas Friedman. This effort restructured 80 technical programs across five different academic disciplines – transportation, energy, manufacturing, environment and construction – to better enable the concept of stackable certification.

Based on a competency framework championed by the National Association of Manufacturers' Manufacturing Institute, students in our redesigned programs are better able to attain meaningful industry certifications as well as traditional academic credentials, built on top of a foundational core of academic, workplace, and technical competencies. Embedded in these programs are skills emphases on energy efficiency and conservation, which we believe will be increasingly important for the technical jobs of the future. Very importantly, our technician programs were designed through the leadership and input of industry and hundreds of faculty from across our state, faculty who ultimately changed the programs they were accustomed to teaching for the purpose of providing greater academic efficiency and enhanced employment certification advantages for students. Along the way, many gained new industry-recognized certifications as well so as to be better enable them to educate students to these important credentials.

This year, we have two big redesign "lifts," if you will. First, community college faculty from across the state are redesigning all of our math courses to better prepare our students with the math competencies needed for tomorrow's work places. Secondly, together with curriculum faculty teams from the great 16-campus University of North Carolina System, our faculty and academic leaders have jointly restructured a proposed new articulation agreement with the University of North Carolina System, which we anticipate to be signed by both our boards in February, again aligning clearer, more efficient pathways to successful student degree attainment through seamless transfer opportunities between all community colleges and public universities in our state.

Finally, we have seen in our state that beyond any specific program structures, perhaps the real secret sauce to student success is in the collective effort of talented faculty, staff and college leaders to deliberately focus and calibrate their local attempts to move the dial on program completion. This requires collective awareness to previously overlooked student success challenges and opportunities, and through multiple outlets today in North Carolina, college presidents, trustees, and faculty and staff leadership teams together learn about ideas for improving student success goals. It also requires new measurement and analytical tools to intricately gauge student success, and through the assistance of a great corporate partner in our state, SAS Institute, we are developing some of the best advanced analytic resources in our sector. And it also requires having the local courage to prototype and test new ideas, sometimes across multiple institutions, which I believe is one of the major benefits of our being one of three participating states in the Completion by Design initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I am extremely proud to be part of America's community colleges, a crucial piece of America's education fabric beyond just our growing scale and size. Our over 1,200 colleges that educate nearly half of American undergraduate students, I believe, are also leaders in

rethinking student success and degree completion in the United States. And I would submit as evidence, *Reclaiming the American Dream*, a report of the recommendations by the American Association of Community Colleges' 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. Boldly calling for a new vision for community colleges that extends our traditional "access" mission to an "access plus success" mission, this blueprint for our future challenges us to focus on three R's – redesigning students' educational experiences, reinventing institutional roles, and resetting the system to create incentives for student and institutional success.

Your work in reauthorizing the Higher Education Act can play a major role in moving the national success agenda forward. You can help us remove barriers that sometimes inhibit the redesign of educational experiences by providing opportunities for accelerating Pell Grant opportunities for student completion, such as providing funding during the summer and also increasing flexibility for Pell Grants for institutions offering innovative program structures such as modularized developmental education. Our experiences also teach us the value of cost-benefiting regulatory requirements that become what we referred to as "ankle biters" at the institutional level, distracting from the mission of student success without adding additional accountability. New gainful employment requirements are an example at the national level of what could be an ankle biter distraction from the ultimate goal.

You can also help reinvent institutional roles by authorizing more meaningful measures for determining student goal attainment. Current Federal IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) measures are increasingly irrelevant for the growing non-traditional college population and, for example, were applicable to only one-third of the student population at our North Carolina community colleges last year. They treat as non-completers students who successfully transfer to four-year colleges, or who complete industry certifications and find employment, before attaining a traditional academic degree. In addition, many students, particularly working students, simply need more than 150% of the "normal time" to complete their programs. Reinventing institutional roles will depend greatly on the appropriateness of the metrics we use to define student success.

Finally, you can reset the system to create incentives for student and institutional success. Breaking down traditional silos, we have learned, can pay dividends in this regard. I would encourage you to continue to look for linkages between what have traditionally been workforce and educational programs. Examples include cross-departmental efforts between Labor and Education in the community college TAACCT (Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training) Grant Program and efforts to incentivize industry-recognized credentials as Senator Hagen has proposed through the AMERICA Works Act. We urge extension of the TAACCT.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss some of the lessons learned during our four-year journey into improving student success. I also want to thank Senators Burr and Hagen who have both been tremendous champions of community colleges and student success in our state. Collectively, with each of your help in reauthorizing the Higher Education Act while removing barriers that inhibit pathways to success, in authorizing more meaningful student attainment measures, and in looking for stronger linkages between educational and workforce programs, I am confident we can push

post-secondary student success to a much higher level. Thank you for your leadership and your support of our students.