

Response to Dr. Jason Wood lecture

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I am honored to be here today to play such an important role in the W. Dallas Herring lecture. I would be honored to simply have been asked to do this. However, to be one of the few non-community college presidents to carry this responsibility is a humbling honor. My sister, who is a life-long educator, having served as teacher, principal, and associate superintendent in school districts in North Carolina and South Carolina and retiring as Associate Commissioner of Education in the State of Kentucky, believes that I have finally made something of myself, by being asked to respond at an event for educators. Perhaps there is still hope for me to make something of myself!

My only qualification for following in the footsteps of so many extraordinary Presidents, is that I met my husband of 45 years in the parking lot of what was then Cleveland Tech, as he was walking to instruct the final classes of the fall semester of his algebra classes for students attending the community college on the GI Bill. Marrying an instructor in the NC Community College system was a wise move on my part. But perhaps my best qualification is that I am the daughter of a Baptist pastor who taught Old and New Testament, World Religions and business English classes at Gaston College in the 1970s. A role he cherished perhaps as much as he cherished being a pastor. I still run into people occasionally who had my father as a teacher. They recount how much they enjoyed his classes and how much they learned. Most importantly, they most always share how he simply piqued their interest in learning more. That's evidence of a skilled and passionate teacher. North Carolina's community colleges are a deep part of my life story. From a sign language course I took as a 16 year old so that I could speak to members of our church, to serving on the NC State Board of Community Colleges, my gratitude for what you all do each day and my awareness of the important role you play in this State cannot be overstated.

My life as a business executive has only further developed my passion for our community colleges, as I have leaned on your resources as we sought to train and equip employees and retrain and renew folks long on our teams. I saw as Secretary of Commerce how the NC Community Colleges offered such an incentive to prospective new businesses, as we could offer the best job training in the Country in partnership

with these companies to meet their needs for a skilled workforce. I am so thankful for this opportunity to be with you all.

Thank you, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research and NC State's College of Education, for having me. Dr. Wood, how thankful we all are for your leadership and innovation in practice in Wisconsin and now in Utah. Thank you for your challenges to us this morning. And challenge us, you have!

I heard many important challenges and words of wisdom in Dr Wood's presentation today. I want to simply underscore several of them:

- We don't graduate people into poverty.
- We should be asking ourselves, "what difference does it make that the student came through our programs? Has the experience here made a difference in their lives?"
- Opportunity without outcomes is unfulfilled promise
- Get to know the students with the greatest challenges to success/those least likely to succeed.
- Have a student success plan for each student *before* they start classes, including a financial package and next steps.
- Collect data on completed plans, program completion, placement and don't let graduation be the finish line. Continue to follow them, connect and collect the data on their progress beyond the experience with your program.

There is so much that I could share around every point. So much. But I choose today to focus on one statement he made and hopefully, I can wrap all my thoughts around this focus.

“Any college can innovate with courage, humility and urgency.”

I am pretty sure that every community college leader in this room and around the Country, watching on-line, would agree we are in challenging times. Our budgets are getting smaller, the demands of the marketplace around us are getting greater and more diverse. Many young people seem to be more interested in becoming influencers than educated professionals. Politics at all levels challenges reason when it comes to funding, priorities and even curriculum.

If we don't want to graduate people into poverty and we truly are motivated and galvanized by the purpose of preparing people for meaningful careers that compensate them well so they can have fruitful and productive lives, raise their families and contribute in their communities, how do we go about it? Everywhere we turn, we read

about our country's labor shortage – we experience it in our own cities and towns – and in North Carolina, achieving family-sustaining wages depends on the vitality of our community colleges.

I believe it does start with courage, paired very closely with another “c” word, community. It takes courage to admit we don't have it all figured out yet.

It takes courage to recognize that some of our long-held practices are no longer serving the students and communities we're here to lift. Is my college aligning programs with high-wage and high-growth industries? Are we ensuring that every credential and degree we offer leads to a living wage – not just a job, but a pathway for economic mobility?

It takes courage to try some new approaches, yes, even take risks, knowing not all will be successful. However, a position of no change almost guarantees that many of our efforts will fail or miss the mark.

It takes courage to challenge the status quo when comfort may be what some on your board, or in your classroom or in your administrative suites would prefer. And some of the change may need to begin with changes in some of those seat holders.

Yes, courage is needed. And that courage is needed at a community level for that is where the work really happens, isn't it?

I agree with Dr. Wood that the work of student success must include leaders in your colleges stepping off the campus to go where the jobs are and to learn, in the workplace, what the needs are today and importantly, what the needs are of the future. The days when you as a college administrator can go to area businesses and say “here are our list of programs we offer” are over. The programs you offer, the degrees you confer and the credentials you provide, must be driven by those who are looking for the credentialed and degreed potential employees. This isn't about how many of each type you graduate, this is about how many you graduate and are gainfully and happily employed! You can't begin to envision that without a collaborative and partnership approach with the employers in your communities. Have you spent time with them? Do you know them? Have you called on them for anything beyond fundraising?

It takes courage to go beyond the grounds of your campus and to place yourself, in community, to understand the needs that are there. It will take courage to make the tough decisions that inevitably have to be made to do the better thing.

Secondly, Dr. Wood said that it takes humility to lead in the midst of change. Leaders with humility are not doormats or pushovers. They are simply people who have a call to lead and understand that service is the driver of their purpose. If service, care and

compassion are not the defining characteristics of your leadership, you may be in the wrong profession. Leading and guiding adult students is not for the faint of heart or the weary of work. If “being the president” or “being the vice president” is your motivation, you are destined for failure. If purpose is not defined by your desire to see students achieve and grow and succeed, you are destined for failure. If their success defines your personal success, you will more likely achieve whatever your goal.

And then there is urgency. Urgency is needed. I have never in my nearly 50-year career, sensed more urgency to focus on student success than I feel today. In Western North Carolina we do not have the choice. We must refresh, renew, revitalize our way of going about the work of educating and equipping students in our communities for success. We had the challenges before Hurricane Helene. The economic decline of our region began in the '80s when textiles and furniture began moving off-shore. Add the recession of 2008, COVID, and the most impactful hurricane in our state's history, and well, we've got a challenge. And urgency is critical.

As the Governor approached me about guiding our long-term economic recovery efforts, I began to identify the short list of critical tenants of economic health: healthcare, infrastructure, economic development, arts, tourism & culture, agriculture, natural resources and yes, education and workforce development. So from the beginning of this work, with the support of the **John M. Belk Endowment**, we have been exploring how we create the education and workforce development system that will provide the workforce we need as we rebound out of a long and protracted period of economic challenge.

Our work is still in progress, but I can assure you, you will see us picking up many of the challenges Dr. Wood has laid out today.

Engaging industry in the process of design and creation of programs, credentialing, innovative job site learning, creative acknowledgement of work experience and skills as workers retrain in new areas of need. This will be done in partnership with industry and communities, who know the needs better than we do in our educational institutions. With humility, we will listen and learn and implement.

Dr. Naomi Albanese was the Dean of the School of Consumer Sciences at UNC-Greensboro where I did my undergraduate work. She was brilliant – served on the Boards of Duke Power and Johnson & Johnson in the '70s, among the first women

to serve on a Fortune 500 board. I had a work/study role in her office and sometimes would drive her to meetings. We would talk along the way. One time I asked her what she would do differently if she were to go to school or start her career all over again. I expected to hear that maybe she would have married or had a family or lived in another country. Her answer was quick and surprising: "I would have learned to type," she said. "The world is going to be operated by computers and I don't know how to type." She added, "I was so determined not to be a secretary that I avoided the course like the plague. Short sighted choice, it turns out."

I sometimes wonder in our children's quest to avoid the jobs of the past, like manufacturing or farming, are we missing the chance to help them see that both lines of work for the future look more like their video games than their daddy's 10-12 hours a day labor intensive job. That's something we need to think about.

We will work to define our vision for the workforce of the future and ensure that everyone in the "food chain" understands the vision, from our community, our teachers, administrators, elected officials, parents and yes, our students. They need to know and feel that their success is our highest priority.

We need to understand the needs of our community, from the community's point of view, not overlooking the vast need we have for service workers of all types in healthcare, emergency services, teaching and social work. For communities to thrive, the basic needs of services must be met, yet our enrollment in these programs fall below what we need to fill the gaps in the workforce. Skilled trades like electricians, plumbers, welders, carpenters are yet another area of need in our communities. These are perfect opportunities to engage young people very early in their education to work alongside craftspeople in these professions in internships and apprenticeships.

We will work with policy at the local, state and federal level to ensure that policies align and that outcomes are measured the same. If we really want to change things long term, just not programmatically, we all need to be in the same boat. (maybe and speak the same economic outcomes language)

And we are going to have to turn loose of some pride and ego and yes, rustle up some humility to admit that how we have been organized, how we have been funded, how we have thought about the processes and systems in the past, may not be what is necessary to carry us into the future. (AND THEN be prepared to ACT...not just admire the problem we identified)

And one additional point – which Dr. Wood did not address, but I am confident he feels the same way – we will engage our children in elementary and middle school with exposure to what our region offers in careers that will provide meaningful and well paid

work that will allow them to provide for themselves and their families and contribute to the communities they call home.

It is particularly important that young men, before they are teenagers, be engaged in seeing the positive possibilities before them, before they find “faster ways to fortune” that lead them nowhere. Across the [education continuum](#), boys consistently fall behind academically – they are less likely than girls to [read proficiently in elementary school](#), less [likely to graduate from high school](#), and [less likely to pursue a college degree](#). We could spend an entire morning on that topic.

A recent CBS Sunday morning broadcast highlighted Andrew Johnson, who is TORO, the mascot for the Houston Texans. He has just been named to the National Mascot Hall of Fame. When asked how he decided to pursue this career, he said he decided in the fifth grade, when the Kansas City Wolf came to school and he was selected to try the suit on in front of the class. His vision for his future was clear.

In a world where answers come instantly and AI can provide the answers for us...In a world where creative outdoor play has been replaced by video games and isolation is a way of life, not just an occasional experience, maybe all of this transformation starts by helping children dream again about a future where work is challenging and yet satisfying, Where learning is fun and the effort is rewarded. Think it's possible? I do.

Governor Jim Martin used to tell the story of a Western North Carolina pastor that served a circuit of churches. He was assigned to a new church and took his son for the first Sunday there. They pulled into the parking lot and walked into the vestibule in the church. On the table there, there was a box, labeled “Poor Box.” The father, wanting to set a good example for his son, took out all the money in his pocket, two quarters, 50 cents, and put it in the box. They went into the sanctuary, and they had a great service. At the end of it, the Chairman of the Deacons met the pastor and expressed his appreciation for his coming and told him that on the Sundays that he preached for them, they would give him something for his coming. And as they reached the vestibule of the church, he opened the “Poor Box” and gave the Pastor all that was in there, two quarters, 50 cents. When the pastor and son reached the car, the boy looked over at his Dad and said, “I guess you would have gotten more out, if you had put more in.”

It's time to pull out all the stops, challenge our assumptions and craft new ways forward. What have we got to lose? I'd suggest we have the chance to lose an entire generation. What are we willing to “put in” to ensure that doesn't happen.

You and your college can innovate with courage, humility and urgency!

