

FEATURED

Community College system chief: Career 'matchmakers' are needed

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N.C. Community College System President Jeff Cox, left, visits with Nash Community College President Lew Hunnicutt, center, and Edgecombe Co College President Greg McLeod after last week's economic summit held by the Rocky Mount Area Chamber of Commerce.

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The president of the N.C. Community College System made clear at the recent 2024 Rocky Mount Area Chamber of Commerce's economic summit that he believes the bottom line is community colleges must do a better job of being matchmakers.

"I call our community colleges a bridge between business and industry – who are desperate for employees with the skillset that they need – and the individual citizens across our state who are looking for a better tomorrow, looking for a better income," Jeff Cox said.

Cox was part of a panel of experts and officials at the Chamber gathering, which was held last week at the Rocky Mount Event Center.

Also on the panel was Bethany Greene, a regional economist at the Charlotte branch of the Federal Reserve in Richmond, Va., who also spoke about the importance of community colleges.

Greene, in a slide-show-like presentation, showed the attendees that there are about 5.5 million Americans who report that they want to work but are neither working nor looking for a job.

Cox said that in almost every community throughout the state, about 40 percent of North Carolina's high school students do not intend to pursue a post-secondary education.

"We've also got a huge adult population who are undereducated and whose skills are misaligned to the labor market," Cox said.

Yet, Cox said great jobs are available out there.

"Most of them don't require four-year degrees, many of them not even two-year degrees, but almost all the really well-paying jobs require some kind of post-secondary degree," he said.

He also emphasized that the community college system has been streamlining community college offerings by emphasizing short-term credentials and moving away from distinguishing between curriculum and continuing education courses.

"It's, I think, the most substantive change we've had in our business model in the last couple of decades, at least," he said.

He also said that the community college system is asking the N.C. General Assembly for about a \$93 million investment, with part of the plan being to fund programs in high demand and whose subsequent jobs pay a high wage when compared to the outcome of taking other courses.

Cox said most communities in the state need more nurses.

The problem, Cox said, is that community colleges today cannot find an instructor in nursing to work for the amount such an instructor has historically been paid.

“We’ve had to elevate their salaries just to be able to attract folks into the profession,” Cox said.

Consequently, Cox said, every time Edgecombe Community College or Nash Community College enrolls another nursing student, the institutions lose more money than they bring in because the programs are so expensive.

“But we want to fix the funding model so it’s sustainable,” Cox said.

Cox said that community colleges are expanding apprenticeship programs and that more programs need to be developed for working adults who need additional training to advance in their careers.

“We have to be joined at the hip with business and industry to think about: How do we support folks joining the economy through apprenticeship programs, internships, earn-while-you-learn kinds of programs, so that people are working and gainfully employed and enrolled in one of our community colleges, picking up those skills that business and industry need them to have to be productive employees,” Cox noted.

Greene earlier in the Chamber gathering emphasized that the regional Federal Reserve has a mandate for maximum employment and that community colleges provide great educational opportunities to train the workforce and meet the needs of the employers in communities.

And Greene said that at the regional Federal Reserve, “We do a lot of research on community colleges and what’s going on with community colleges in our region — our region being the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland and West Virginia.”

Greene also showed data about the labor force participation for those ages 16 and above, which dropped sharply in 2020 and recovered but not back to the 2019 level.

Greene also said that what she and others are seeing is that the recovery in the labor force participation rate has been much better among women than men.

Overall, Greene said there is more demand for workers than the supply for that labor.

“And that’s not something that we’ve seen in the past decades,” she said.

She also said that she believes a lot of people are asking themselves if they go to an educational institution for four years, then are they going to get a return on their investment, especially if they are taking on debt.

And she said, “Over the past 10 years, we have seen a decline in enrollment in higher ed.”

Greene said that in 2020 there was quite a large dip in enrollment for community colleges but that in 2022-23 and 2023-24 there has been quite a jump in enrollment.

“And when we look even further into the data, what we’re seeing is that there’s also a shift in what people want to study,” Greene said.

She showed a graphic to illustrate that where the regional Federal Reserve is seeing the most growth for community colleges is community colleges with larger vocational programs.

“They want to be workforce ready, right?” she said of what potential students want to study. “They want to make sure that when they’re investing into a program, that they’ll be able to find a job after.”

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