



The College Connection

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Spruell "Randy" Britt
Chairman, Board of Trustees
Southeastern Community College

People across the country are starting to realize something that many here take for granted – North Carolina's community college system is a model for preparing and retraining people to meet the ever-changing demands of today's economy.

But our community college system did not become a quintessential leader in workforce development overnight. It was decades of state investment that positioned North Carolina's community colleges as a major driver of economic development.

During his recent State of the Union address, President Barack Obama, for the second year in a row, spotlighted a North Carolinian who received job skills training at a community college.

He featured Jackie Bray of Kings Mountain, who retrained at Central Piedmont Community College after being laid off from her job. Following her training, she was hired last summer at a Siemens gas turbine plant in Charlotte.

The President said that he wanted every American looking for work to have the same opportunity that Bray did. He added that it is time to turn our unemployment system into a re-employment system that puts people to work and that community colleges should be at the forefront.

The importance of education to our nation's recovery is underscored in "That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back," a book written last year by Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, a leading foreign policy thinker.

The authors recognize that Americans are optimists, we have a work ethic, penchant for innovation and a commitment to the future. But they argue that to remain a great country, we must invest in education and infrastructure.

I contend that investment in education is vital not only to the betterment of our nation, but also to the future of our local community. I encourage the Columbus County Board of Commissioners to keep this in mind as they consider options for using the county's

\$18.8 million unassigned fund balance – or savings account – which is the largest in years. While I commend the commissioners for building a healthy rainy day fund, I urge them to invest part of the reserves in our local educational institutions including SCC, with jobs being the ultimate goal.

State funds cover most expenses at the College, but state law requires that the county provide maintenance, utilities, grounds and security. Last year, the College ran short on funds toward the end of the year, and had to use revenues generated from vending machines to help pay the light bills and keep the heat on.

The commissioners have faced tough budgets in past years and worked hard to increase the size of their fund balance. But now, with a healthy savings account, the county has an opportunity to make good on its obligations to the thousands of Columbus County residents who rely on SCC for education and jobs training.

Commissioners obligated millions in recent years in order to improve jail facilities committed millions more for a new courthouse. While these are important needs, it is high time that the county make an investment in something that we can all be proud of.

With interest rates low, county leaders have acknowledged that they are getting no return on the money sitting in their fund balance. I can assure commissioners that by providing additional resources to Southeastern Community College and the people we serve, the county will generate a high return on its investment.