

Burns to Retire from Wilkes Community College

Written by Amber Herman
Friday, 10 January 2014 09:25

After 18 years of coming to the office with a renewed sense of excitement and zeal each day, Dr. Gordon Burns, president of Wilkes Community College, says it is time to retire as the college celebrates its 50th anniversary. “As of March, I will have been privileged to serve as president of Wilkes Community College for 18 years – the longest serving president in the college’s history. It is difficult to let go of something that I have loved and has been such a huge part of my life, but I believe that it is time for me, after 46 years in education, to retire and allow your new president to lead the college into the next 50 years,” Burns said when he formally announced his retirement to the Board of Trustees at its January 9 meeting. “With you and others like you providing support, the college will continue to grow and thrive and be the pride of its service area.”

Kim Faw, vice-president of Instructional Support & Student Services, shared her thoughts on the essence of Dr. Burns’ leadership.

“Dr. Burns came from humble beginnings. He was the first in his family to attend and graduate from college and then went on to earn a doctorate. He truly epitomizes the power of education and the opportunity it provides – always an educator, from his beginnings as an industrial education teacher to his final role as president of Wilkes Community College.

Dr. Burns often quoted Leo Rosten during his remarks honoring retiring faculty and staff: ‘The purpose of life is not to be happy - but to matter, to be productive, to be useful, to have it make some difference that you have lived at all.’

It truly can be said that Dr. Burns made a tremendous difference at Wilkes Community College. WCC is a better place because of his leadership. His contributions are many, including fiscal stability; growth in programs, facilities and technological infrastructure; a vital and well-respected place in the community; collaboration and partnerships with public schools, government entities, and business and industry; and a collegial, collaborative work environment.”

In anticipation of Burns’ retirement announcement, the personnel committee of the Board of Trustees recommended members to serve on a search committee in December. Approved by the Board at its January 9 meeting, the search committee will meet with Dr. R. Scott Ralls, president of the N.C. Community College System (NCCCS), and establish job requirements, desired qualities and interview questions.

The board will begin its active search for a new president immediately by posting the job vacancy and advertising in state and national publications. The presidential search timeline proposes a Feb. 28 deadline for accepting applications for the position. The search committee will spend March 3-7 screening and rating applicants and will then select leading candidates for first round interviews. The committee will submit those names to NCCCS for credential checks and conduct first-round interviews in March. It will then recommend finalists to the full board of trustees for final interviews.

Finalists will be interviewed in April, with a chosen candidate recommended to the state community college system’s board on April 11. The state board will vote on the candidate on

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April 18.

Dr. Burns has not pinned down an exact retirement day, saying, "My exact retirement date will be determined later in the search process."

During his tenure at Wilkes Community College, Dr. Burns has led the college through much growth and many successes.

- Transformed a fiscally constrained college into one of fiscal viability. In 17.5 years (18 years as of March 2014) as president, total FTE increased from 1,859 to 3,339 and state budget increased from \$8,913,960 to \$17,881,253. The college budget, including all accounts and sources, is \$35,881,891 for 2013-14.

- "B" Townes, retired vice president of Development, said, "Typically, presidential leadership at institutions of higher education is described as visionary with a slant by the individual toward being either a builder, promoter or educator (teacher).

- Over the past 18 years that I have known and worked with Gordon Burns at Wilkes Community College, I have seen his leadership style develop into a collegial mix of all three. He has a subtle way of being involved from the onset of an issue, trend or opportunity, and after setting course, then stepping back to let those responsible fully develop the plan or project.

- I remember the first group sessions with the entire college community when he shared his assessment of where he thought the college was at the time and where he wanted to take us. From his early days as the fourth president of WCC, he guided the faculty and staff toward his vision of making WCC a "model rural community college."

- Gordon could be heard saying, 'We are fiscally constrained, planning drives budget, or we are a college in transition. For those who are not on board, the train of change has left the station.'

- History will show that as Gordon Burns steps off the train, he will have left it running faster than it was when he first stepped on board as the engineer."

- Witnessed the crossing of the \$30 million threshold in transfers from the WCC Endowment Corporation to Wilkes Community College, an increase of \$27,150,881 from \$2,982,399 in

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1996.

- Created a new vision for the long range and facilities master plans for the campuses in Wilkes, Ashe and Alleghany counties. The plans have included and continue to include new construction and major renovations at the Wilkes and Ashe campuses and the Alleghany and North Wilkesboro centers, relocation projects, land acquisition, parking and paving, and infrastructure improvements.
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- In Ashe County, construction and renovation projects include the two Ashe Campus additions, Family Central and an enhanced entrance.
- In Alleghany County improvements include the relocation and renovation of the Alleghany Center.
- Major projects in Wilkes County include the Student and Learning Resources Center; “Net 98” technology project; addition to the Walker Center; “The Next Step Phase One,” which included construction of Horticulture Complex, construction of Lowe’s Hall and an addition to Daniel Hall (Applied Technology Center); addition to Bumgarner Gymnasium and renovations to the North Wilkesboro Center; renovation of Beacon Building; Wilkes Early College High School renovation in Randolph Hall; addition to Building 7; construction of storage facility; and, the construction of Automotive Technology Complex. Land and facility acquisitions include land on Collegiate Drive; the North Wilkesboro Center; the former Church Apartments property; and, the former Northwestern Bank property. Other significant enhancements include those to roadways and parking; new entrance signs; cyber classrooms; administrative offices; bookstore; student success center; learning and teaching center; advising center; classrooms and offices in most buildings; walkways; enhancements to the Robin Joines Plaza, Whicker Garden, Watson Musical Wall, renovation of the Watson Stage, walking trail improvements, pond restoration and more. Planning is underway for “The Next Step Phase Two” and a new Health Sciences facility.
- Improved the esprit de corps and cohesiveness among college personnel focusing on mission and vision and goals; secured reaffirmation of accreditation from the Commission on Colleges of Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and successfully completed the Fifth-Year Impact Report; achieved accreditation/reaffirmation of multiple instructional programs; improved and automated the performance review and budget planning processes; invigorated professional development to ensure a highly qualified, student-oriented, technologically able (proficient; capable) faculty and staff; and, advanced campus security with emergency response plans and mass notification systems.
- Created electronic campuses with wireless infrastructure, including intra- and inter-campus networking of Wilkes, Ashe and Alleghany campuses; added cyber classrooms, individual employee computers, virtual campuses, web pages, campus digital signs, campus e-mail, e-commerce with online registration, voicemail, Internet and cyber courses with public schools and universities, Gmail accounts, document imaging, Author IT (electronic catalog software), course management systems and more.

“When Gordon arrived at WCC it was during a period when strong leadership was needed,” explains Dr. Dean Sprinkle, senior vice president of Instruction. “Gordon met that need, bringing

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stability and unity to the college. He leaves a legacy of growth, both in enrollment and facilities, but also in having inspired all of us to be the best that we can be.

He has overseen the addition of a number of new facilities, the latest of which is the Oakwoods complex in which he was instrumental in obtaining. Perhaps one of the greatest areas of growth he has overseen is in the use of technology in the classroom and for distance learning. Under Gordon's leadership, the college went from a time when there were few desktop computers to a time when technology pervades all of instruction. He was responsible for guiding the college during this time of tremendous transformation in higher education.

Gordon loves education, especially the community college. He is an exceptional leader who has served the college and the community well. He has ensured that the college has had the personnel, technology and facilities to fulfill its mission and serve the community. While I know he will always be a friend to WCC, we will miss his vision and leadership."

- Expanded and repackaged curricula offerings with the addition of new curricula, evening/weekend college programs, and services including computerized testing, advising and online registration.
- Enhanced partnerships with business and industry through the development of child development center (space reclaimed in 2009); Lowe's faculty chair; advanced materials cluster development; Tyson family and Lowe's employee days; courses and customized training for multiple existing and new and expanding industries and small businesses; services for emergency services personnel; education and training for dislocated workers; regional workforce preparation systems; JobLink; Career Readiness Certificates, stackable credentials and more.
- Greatly expanded partnerships and programming with public schools and regional universities, resulting in expanded programs of study and services for students and citizens of the service area. Started an "afternoon college" program for high school students, a new Wilkes Early College High School, Career & College Promise program, and selected bachelor's degree and master's degree programs offered via regional universities.

When asked about his successes at Wilkes Community College, Dr. Burns said, "Of course, I didn't personally do all these things. Perhaps my greatest contribution has been the assembling, leading and creating synergy among a talented team of administrators, faculty and staff and creating a learning and working environment that fosters achievement of mutually agreed upon goals resulting in shared pride, satisfaction and success."

"Gordon often deflected the spotlight. He was quick to point out that whatever the college might have accomplished was the result of the hard work of others," says Larry Caudill, retired dean of Student Services. "Spizzerinctum. For the longest time I thought this was a word made up by Gordon Burns' dad and instilled in his son. It is a word Gordon was inclined to use when he

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wanted to cajole us to dig deeper, to work harder, to finish what we had started. Over time I learned it meant much more to him. Chutzpah, backbone, determination, ambition, the will to succeed – this not only defined spizzerinctum but it defined Gordon Burns as well. Gordon has always been a big picture kind of guy, devoted to a long range plan. We sat through planning retreat after planning retreat to develop a vision for Wilkes Community College. His vision for the college extended beyond the facilities and programs he led us to develop for Wilkes, Ashe and Alleghany counties. Gordon wanted WCC to be a vital part of the development, growth and enrichment of each community we served. He led by example. This wasn't his job; this was his life. Wilkes Community College became a reflection of Gordon Burns.

Under Dr. Burns' presidency, WCC has experienced tremendous growth in terms of enrollment, facilities, educational programs and impact on the economy of our service area. WCC has become one of the most successful institutions in the N.C. Community College System, routinely surpassing the performance indicators set by the system.

Anyone can lead in times of prosperity. The real test is how a leader does in difficult times, when times are hard and there just isn't enough money to do what needs to be done. Gordon Burns proved to be a leader for all times."

In the end, those of us who worked for him may not remember everything that Gordon Burns did or what he said; however, we will remember how he made us feel. We feel appreciated for what we have done and for what we have accomplished. We feel that we have made a difference.

For Gordon Burns, there is a great sense of satisfaction in the way the college has become ingrained into community. Wilkes Community College has become a vital part of its service area. The pride that WCC has in its community has been reciprocated by the pride the community has in WCC. That's not a bad legacy."

At the January 9 WCC Board of Trustees meeting, trustees appointed members of the search committee and approved the search process and timeline. A tentative date was set for the search committee and trustees to meet with Dr. Scott Ralls, president of the North Carolina Community College, and to establish the job requirements and desired qualities of Dr. Burns' successor. A webpage has been established, <http://www.wilkescc.edu/presidentialsearch/>, to assist in the search for a new president.

Wilkes Community College, a member of the North Carolina Community College System, is a public, two-year, open-door institution serving the people of Wilkes, Ashe and Alleghany counties and beyond. Established in 1965, WCC continues to build on a strong history of meeting the educational needs and cultural interests of our students, community and workforce. WCC prepares learners for success in a dynamic world.