



Dr. Stephen Scott

DISTINGUISHED PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

“I got here as quickly as I could,” says Dr. Stephen Scott, President of Wake Technical Community College from 2003 to 2018.

A South Carolina native, Scott came to the Tar Heel state in 1988 to take the helm of Southeastern Community College in Whiteville before landing his position at Wake Tech in 2003.

“I knew I was in the right place when I came here to interview. There’s something special about the people.”

As anyone who meets Dr. Scott can attest, there’s something special about him, too.

For one thing, he “collects accents.” Yes, you read that right.

Since his days hosting a radio show in Columbus County, Scott has enjoyed identifying a person’s home town or native country based on accent alone. He says it has been a great way to strike up conversations with strangers and make new friends. And while his enthusiasm for this hobby is impressive, he admits he doesn’t always get it right.

“In my head, I sound like James Earl Jones, but I suddenly become much more Southern when I hear myself speak.”

Scott’s magnetism and approachability are two of his trademarks, traits that well positioned him to lead Wake Tech through a golden age of growth and innovation.

“If you help adults to help themselves, you help give them dignity.”

During Scott's tenure, Wake Tech's full-time enrollment numbers more than doubled to 21,000 (74,000 when including part-time students). This astronomical growth in student population spurred an equally impressive increase in funding: the school's budget grew from \$60 million in 2003 to \$279 million upon Scott's retirement.

And while budget and enrollment numbers have skyrocketed, so too has the physical campus, itself. Wake Tech has doubled its number of facilities with the addition of five campuses from 2005 to 2018.

There's a reason why this growth is important, says Scott.

“If you help adults to help themselves, you help give them dignity.” Community colleges empower adults to improve their own lives, he says.

In addition to the humanist perspective, Scott says that the role of community colleges is just as important as ever before.

“Community colleges are a powerful tool for workforce and economic development,” he notes, especially as the skills needed by today's employers continue to change.

And when it comes to preparing students for the workforce, Wake Tech is as innovative as it is effective.

“Textbooks tell you that leaders should focus on their students or customers. But there's just one of me. So I thought, ‘If I focus on employees, they can focus on students.’ That was my ‘aha moment.’”

The result of this ‘aha moment’? Applied Benchmarking: a continuous improvement initiative that motivates staff to identify a single problem area, research effective solutions and implement a chosen solution within an allotted budget.

“It has been a go-to mechanism for problem solving,” says Scott, adding that Applied Benchmarking unleashed his staff's creativity while empowering them to take greater responsibility for their roles as leaders.

Scott's implementation of Applied Benchmarking earned the prestigious Bellwether Award from the Community College Futures Assembly in 2014.

But perhaps more than any award, the true testament of Scott's effectiveness as an educator and leader is displayed in the gestures of the student body.

Just a month ago, Scott began to go through a box of items that once lived in his office. He came across a beautifully engraved folio given to him by the Student Government Association. Upon opening it, he found dozens of post-it notes, all containing handwritten messages of thanks and gratitude for the service he provided North Carolina's students for decades.

It appears Dr. Stephen Scott's intuition was correct in 1988; he certainly did come to the “right place.”