



THE NORTH CAROLINA CHAMBER
PROUDLY PRESENTS ITS

AWARD FOR DISTINGUISHED PUBLIC SERVICE TO

DR. SCOTT RALLS

FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE
NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

Before he knew what he wanted to do with his life, Dr. Scott Ralls knew what interested him — workforce issues, specifically the impact of technology on workers.

“I didn’t know what that meant,” said Ralls. “You can’t just look in the newspaper to find a job opportunity for that. So there were several points along the way where I thought, you know, you can’t make a living off of being interested in this.”

But, as it turns out, those interests are what ultimately have shaped Ralls’ career.

From the time he was in grad school, Ralls worked in a variety of roles with the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Commerce focusing on technology and the workforce, before finding his way to the N.C. Department of Commerce as the director of employment and training. After a few years in that role, Ralls made the move to focus on customized job training for the community college system.

“That was probably my favorite job of all time,” he said. “I absolutely just loved that job. I really felt like I’d found my home with the community colleges. All those years I’d never quite known what my interests would lead to, but by then I was convinced that community colleges were the place for me.”

His roles continued to expand, from director of economic development to vice president for the state system in workforce development. Then in 2002, Ralls made the move to become president of Craven Community College in New Bern.

"I really loved being a college president," he said. "I love being on a campus; I love the student interaction, the community involvement."

After he spent six years as a college president, however, Ralls was presented with a new opportunity. Martin Lancaster was retiring as president of the community college system, and Ralls was being nudged by friends and colleagues to put his name in the hat to replace Lancaster. So, he did, and in May 2008, Ralls was chosen to be the president of the North Carolina Community College System.

"I would joke that I became system president the day the Great Recession started, which was not technically correct, but it was really close," said Ralls. "The state unemployment rate was a little over 5 percent on the day I started, and within six months we were in double-digit unemployment."

Ralls said that, for community colleges, that meant that the community college system saw simultaneously the largest budget cuts in system history and the largest enrollment increase in system history.

"During that time, it would have been easy for us as a system to just deal with those things and try to get to the other side," said Ralls. "But we did some really big things as a system during that time, rethinking workforce development, becoming more responsive in terms of job training, changing funding models and putting an emphasis on student success. We really stepped back and said, 'What can we do better?' and I think there are very few systems of higher education that did something like that during that time."

Ralls traces that sense of determination to accomplish what needs to be done, that dedication to service, to a number of sources, including his parents and a few great teachers in his earlier years. Later, it was some of the great names in North Carolina leadership who shaped his views.

"Former Governor Jim Hunt was always a model of public service to me," said Ralls. "Just his fortitude of commitment and always striving to do more. He was always very focused. A lot of times people talk about things that they want to accomplish, but very few people focus, prioritize and execute things the way he does."

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In higher education, Ralls always looked up to former UNC System President Bill Friday, who Ralls said embodied the notion that universities are more than institutions of higher education; they're institutions of public service.

"Even today, even though I'm not in North Carolina anymore, I still keep his picture on my desk to say, when things get tough, what would Bill Friday do?"

Ralls moved to Virginia in late 2015 to take up the role of president of Northern Virginia Community College. While he misses North Carolina and knows that he will return at some point, he is happy to be back on a college campus, specifically one that puts an emphasis on his two passions — technology-based workforce development and student success.

Despite moving north, Ralls maintains a love for North Carolina and is optimistic about the state's future.

"I think North Carolina will prosper by being committed to the things that got us to where we are today," said Ralls. "And I think that commitment to higher education as an investment, education as economic development, is clearly one of the things that got us here."