



Inauguration Speech

Renewing Our Commitment

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West Virginia Northern Community College

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To the platform party, Board of Governors, Foundation members, faculty, staff, students, community supporters, family, and friends, thank all of you for being with us today.

As we gather in this wonderful historical building, we acknowledge the history of our institution and salute those who have served since West Virginia Northern Community College was established in 1972. Our success today was built on the hard work, dedication and commitment of the faculty, staff, and members of the community who envisioned and supported a mission of access and educational opportunity. That success today includes providing services on three campuses – New Martinsville, Weirton, and Wheeling – to meet the needs of the residents of Brooke, Hancock, Marshall, Ohio, Wetzel, and Tyler counties.

I am honored to be standing with you today and grateful for the opportunity to play a leadership role in the continuing success of West Virginia Northern Community College. I am also grateful to my parents, Judy and Harry Riley, who are with us today. Somehow, within the limited opportunities and resources of our small-town world, they developed a parenting style that combined high expectations with a balance of “but don’t get above your raising.” My younger sisters, Rebecca and Corinna, and I grew up watching parents and grandparents lead by example – work hard and help others. So today, publicly, I get to say, “Thanks Mom and Dad.”

I am also grateful to my husband, Richard McCray, who I met at a small community college where we both worked 20 years ago. If we are lucky in life, we get to marry our best friend, and in that respect I have been most fortunate. Dick’s long career in higher education and his life experiences have enabled him to balance my Type A personality by keeping things real. For example, when staff asked how they should refer to him as the president’s spouse, he was fine with being called “first dude.”

Today is an opportunity to renew our commitment to community college education. I’m proud to say that is something that I have been doing my entire career. My first job was as a student support counselor in a small community college in Virginia. As a first generation college student myself, I could certainly relate to both the uncertainties and hopes of the students who walked through our doors. That was thirty years ago and I have spent my entire career in community colleges – twenty of those years in the state of West Virginia.

I believe that community colleges have evolved to now serve as the foundation of the nation’s higher education system. Our mission is broad and we do try to be all things to all people – and people have come to rely on that commitment.

Community colleges focus on access through an open door admissions philosophy. We realize that not all students initially plan to attend college but we help them begin their college journey. Affordability is also part of that access and we strive to place a college education within financial reach for all students.

Community colleges offer developmental education programs for those students needing to gain college ready skills or those who simply need to brush-up.

Community colleges provide career and technical programs to prepare students for the workforce and a career – Northern offers over seventy one or two year degree programs to give students this start. It is estimated that 2/3 of all new jobs will require some higher education – like one and two year degree programs offered by Northern.

We also provide degrees in Associate of Arts and Associates of Science, enabling students to transfer to four-year institutions at the junior level. The College has specialized two plus two programs and articulation agreements with regional colleges and universities and colleges across the state.

Workforce development is another key mission component and is evidenced through employer involvement in the development of our technical degree programs and customized training to upgrade skills of a changing workforce. One of the College's most recent successes has been the development of multiple employer partnerships in the regional oil and gas industry.

Community outreach and continuing education are also part of the mission. Community based skill and personal interest courses support a philosophy of life-long learning and the college is also engaged with the community through student activities, service learning projects, and other partnerships.

How do we continuously fulfill such a broad-based mission? We have amazing employees. Many of us are fortunate to have someone, some group behind us – your spouse, family, or friends and I am so proud to say to a new student, that at Northern, you have a whole college behind you. All of our staff in every department, all of our faculty, all of our boards, and our supporters believe in our mission and believe that each student can succeed.

I know that we have amazing employees because I have had the pleasure of working with them for the past seven years. And in my new role as President, in the first 90 days we have worked together to: develop a strategic enrollment management plan to focus on recruitment and student retention; taken steps to reinforce a culture of enhanced communication and transparency; and in challenging times for all of higher education, we are preparing to present the board with a balanced budget for 2016.

Dr. Wayne Dyer, author and psychologist wrote, “If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.” My focus in this new role has shifted to the big picture. My job is to work to ensure that the college has the necessary foundation in place to provide quality programs and services, and ensure capacity to fulfill our mission for the long-term. So in the next 90 days and the new academic year, we will embark on the development of a new 5 year Strategic Plan; we will complete requirements for the college's reaccreditation process by the Higher Learning Commission for 2016; we will work to increase partnerships with secondary and vocational schools to build pathways to a community college education; we will continue to build quality transfer education agreements so that students may transfer seamlessly to a baccalaureate education; we will expand our engagement with business and industry – in oil, gas, and beyond - to ensure we are providing graduates that meet regional needs; and we will assess our community education programs and services to better pinpoint the varied needs of the life-long learner in the communities we serve.

We will accomplish these things and more by being innovative, relevant, in touch, and engaged. We will work together for a new future for our new students. A future for “all who wish to learn.”

Colleges are bastions of tradition – and therein lies a level of comfort and perceived stability – but not for community colleges – not for successful community colleges. I believe community colleges must hold on to traditions while at the same time, constantly re-inventing themselves to meet the needs of students, employers, and the community. That is why community colleges are so alive, so energized, so simply amazing.

This speech, this ceremony, represent college traditions. But today, they are also symbolic of our renewed commitment to our mission. We do not need to redefine our mission – our mission is part of a 100 year tradition of community colleges – it will not change, it will not waver.

I do not have any doubt that the people in this room today have renewed their commitment to West Virginia Northern, our mission and our students. In just these first 90 days, I have seen it, I have heard it, and I have felt it. The entire college has contributed to a new enrollment plan with creative ideas on how we can better share the message of what Northern has to offer and how we can best reach potential students who may need us the most. The staff are talking about ways we can simplify our processes and procedures and de-mystify this process of getting into college. Faculty are talking about student achievement and student success, using technology to provide students with more flexibility, and increasing interactions with employers to make sure we are providing what they need. As I've had the opportunity to be out and meet with more people, business and industry, boards and community organizations, they are talking – sometimes I don't get the chance to even begin before I hear – “We love Northern. How can we help? How can we work with you?”

People are talking – that is gratifying, humbling, and challenging. One of my primary goals as President is to keep everyone talking. When people are talking, there will be new ideas, there will be new programs, there will be new partnerships, and there will be a renewed commitment to our mission every day.

I believe the people in this room this afternoon have renewed that commitment and I thank you for being part of the ceremony today.

This commitment to West Virginia Northern and its mission will keep us focused, in touch and in tune, and will guide us successfully through the inevitable challenges and opportunities that we will face together. It is with humility, hope and commitment that I serve to face those challenges and opportunities with you.