

Cathy Cook's goal at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College is to make her students feel comfortable speaking in front of crowds.

It's a goal the school is obviously proud of. Cook received the 2008 Outstanding Excellence in Teaching Award for RCCC.

She is also RCCC's nominee for this year's N.C. Community College System-RJ Reynolds Excellence in Teaching Award.

As a communications instructor, Cook teaches public-speaking classes.

Her reward as a teacher is seeing students progress and become more comfortable throughout the semester, Cook said.

"Most of my students come in and are very afraid on the first day," she said.

Cook encourages them and assures them it's normal to have a fear of public speaking, she said.

Her students first write a speech telling their own stories. Throughout the course, they tell a children's story and also deliver a speech from history.

By the end of the course, "they feel empowered to speak out," Cook said.

For her, the best part is when former students return and tell her they volunteered to give a presentation at their jobs or did other public speaking, she said.

"Her students dearly love her," said Tim Foley, executive vice president at RCCC.

Cook has taught at the college for about four years.

"I love the mission of our college," she said. "I love our students. We have a very diverse student population, and I love that diversity."