



Dr. Richard Brownell will retire as president of Rowan Cabarrus Community College on May 30 after 30 years as president. Photo by Wayne Hinshaw, Salisbury Post

Dr. Richard Brownell presides over his last graduation ceremony today as president of Rowan-Cabarrus Community College — his 30th.

The longest-serving community college president in North Carolina, Brownell retires at the end of May. He'll be leaving a school that has evolved from Rowan Technical Institute to a regional, multi-campus community college — all under his leadership.

It wasn't easy. As Brownell likes to say, nothing is achieved without difficulty.

Brownell took time Friday to reflect on his career, identify the highs and the lows, and talk about the future of RCCC.

Q: What has been the high point of your 30 years here with RCCC?

A: The high point has been the creation of the first regional, multi-campus college in North Carolina, against all odds.

I certainly didn't do that alone. Leadership is a group phenomenon. But I was a catalyst that helped provide a vision for a lot of people who worked together to make it happen.

You may have heard me quote the philosopher Kirkegaard. (He points to a saying on the wall, "We live in the present in light of the future.") To me, that means that the future is not waiting to happen. There are many futures.

And if you can envision the most desirable future for your institution, and get enough people to share that vision — well, the very energy of doing that brings that vision of the future into the present and makes it much more likely.

Q: What made you see the value of partnering with Cabarrus?

A: There are always bits and pieces of the future evident in the present. As I saw the changes in Cabarrus County, there were signals that the textile days were over.

Then, I looked to Charlotte and saw that this city suddenly was transforming itself, even then. ... People began seeing that here could emerge a new Atlanta.

Initially the community college system had been created as industrial education centers to help the state transition from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy.

But now we had to transition from a manufacturing economy — the handwriting was on the wall, even then — into a post-manufacturing economy we didn't know much about. Still don't.

I saw that the only way we could have a community college with all of the resources and comprehensive programs necessary to serve this area that was just poised on the edge of radical change was to have the two counties united and supporting a college big enough to have the resources to meet the needs of the area.

Q: Was it hard to win people over to that idea?

A: Nothing is ever achieved without difficulty. People don't like change.

People wondered what in the world is going on? Who's this crazy guy from Rowan Tech who doesn't even sound like us when he talks and he's talking about a regional vision, a community college. What's a community college?

But they began to understand the advantage to the area. They got on board and made it happen.

I often like to talk in terms of the role of a leader being a catalyst. I like the image of a gyroscope. Once it's spinning, it maintains stability. But somebody had to pull the string. So maybe a transformative leader is a string-puller.

Q: What's been the biggest frustration for you?

A: The fact that the community college system is so unwieldy in its structure. It's like an onion that's grown layer after layer after layer, and they never get rid of the old one.

We already had too many community colleges, 58. This seemed to be such a sensible model. I couldn't believe that it wouldn't be funded.

We needed extra money because you couldn't have two separate stand-alone campuses with the necessary support structure. There wasn't any money to pay for these necessary duplicated positions. They added up to about \$1 million a year.

Q: What was your reaction when you heard about Pillowtex closing?

A: Suddenly, here are 4,000 people standing around with expressions like stunned oxen, wondering what to do. And I was one of them.

I tend to be an optimistic, can-do person, but this was one of the ones that nearly floored me.

There was no state money to deal with the crisis. There was no local money to deal with the crisis. We had already been experiencing the effects of the displaced worker phenomenon for a couple of years. We were chock-a-block full of people. Where am I going to put these people? How am I going to get the money to solve it? I was discouraged.



Dr. Richard Brownell will retire as president of Rowan Cabarrus Community College on May 30 after 30 years as president. Photo by Wayne Hinshaw, Salisbury Post

But that's why leadership is a group phenomenon. Our senior leadership team sat around this table, grappled with this, and our incredibly wonderful vice president for continuing ed, Jeanie Moore, sat there like a cheerleader, and she raised our spirits. And she said, "We can do this. We have to do this. These are our neighbors. They need help."

We ended up getting a grant from the Department of Labor, which had never been done before. And then hiring retirees and throwing together a program. It about strained the college to the breaking point for over a year and a half, but we did.

Q: Do you think RCCC is in a position to help people take advantage of the N.C. Research Campus?

A: Oh, yes. Sixty percent of the jobs in biotech are associate-degree level jobs. The university is not going to train these people. It's like if you go to a hospital for brain surgery, how many brain surgeons are there? Most of the people that help the whole thing work are technicians. The same thing's true here.

Q: What do you see in RCCC's future?

A: Technology is just so overwhelming in its impact. Everything's in flux. You need more distance education, you need more online programs, customized delivery of courses and programs in the workplace.

And we have to be proactive in developing those. You can't wait. There's no safety net left in the pace of change. It used to be you could muddle through. But now you can't.

Collaboration and partnerships are going to be ever more important. And assessment is ever more critical. It's one thing to say we're educating people, but what's the outcome?

I like to say that teaching is the process of causing learning. If no learning has taken place, no teaching has occurred. Sometimes teachers don't like to hear that.

Q: What is in the future for you?

A: God only knows. I'm 77 years old. I hope I have some kind of a future left.

I have come in here every day for 30 years. There's always been a new challenge, new excitement. And I'm used to multi-tasking from morning to night, which has kept my brain somewhat functional. I hope I don't end up moldering away like an old mushroom.

Having been with these people so long, they're my family, my friends, my staff. It's going to be a big adjustment for me. These last few days are rather emotionally stressful.

I did a lot traveling in my former career in the military and then, when we were in our late 60s, my wife Lorraine and I traveled a lot. But since I lost my wife, in the year 2000, I kind of feel like half of an old pair of slippers.

Q: Was there a low point during your presidency, a particularly discouraging moment?

A: Probably the greatest low point during my presidency has been the long, horrible year that my wife was dying of cancer. I would spend mornings in here and then afternoons on vacation, taking

my wife home. Thank God for a good team of vice presidents and Jerry Chandler. We held it all together. But it was an extraordinarily difficult time.

Q: How would you finish this sentence: "In an ideal world, RCCC would ..."

A: In any world, whether it's ideal or not, RCCC will continue to flourish as it has in the past because it's essential to the people of the region. It's the people's college. It's democracy's college. It will always be here, it will always flourish, it will always change to meet needs.

Brownell timeline

- **1963:** Rowan Technical Institute is located on a 102-acre campus on Klumac Road.
- **1977:** Dr. Richard Brownell becomes president. The school has fewer than 2,000 students, 111 employees and a budget of under \$3 million.
- **1979:** The institute becomes Rowan Technical College to recognize transferable, college-level offerings.
- **1987:** Rowan Technical College becomes Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, the first regional multi-campus college in the state.
- **1990:** The first building on South Campus is completed, with the help of a \$2.2 million bond issue.
- **2003:** RCCC enrolls 49 percent of Pillowtexas's 3,984 former workers for retraining and later wins recognition from the U.S. Department of Labor for its innovative approach to workforce development.
- **2007:** RCCC opens R3 in Kannapolis to help workers retrain for jobs at David Murdock's biotechnology center. The N.C. Research Campus will include a 60,000-square-foot building for RCCC biotech job training.
- **2008:** At Brownell's retirement, RCCC has 20,000 students, nearly 2,000 employees and a budget approaching \$48 million.
- **Today:** RCCC holds graduation ceremonies for nearly 700 students at 10:30 a.m. at Cabarrus Arena and Events Center.