

By Emily Ford
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KANNAPOLIS — Faced with a shrinking budget, burgeoning enrollment and the task of training a workforce for the N.C. Research Campus, Dr. Carol Spalding on Friday became the third president of Rowan-Cabarrus Community College.

"I am humbled and challenged by the opportunity to serve as president at this critical time in the history of this college, this community, this state and our nation," Spalding said. "I ask your help."

With about 400 dignitaries, students and faculty members watching, Spalding took the oath of office in front of the Core Laboratory Building, the centerpiece of the \$1.5 billion biotechnology complex in downtown Kannapolis.

The Research Campus will rely on the community college to prepare hundreds of lab technicians and research assistants over the next decade.

RCCC has the "single-most critical role in the success of this community and the campus," said N.C. Sen. Fletcher Hartsell, who pledged to fight for more state funding for the college.

The recession has taken a toll on RCCC, which last week cut five classroom instructors and 16 other full-time positions in response to a \$1.2 million decrease in state funding.

As part of Spalding's inauguration, leaders had hoped to break ground Friday on RCCC's long-awaited new building at the Research Campus. But developer Castle & Cooke North Carolina, which will construct the building and lease it to RCCC, has yet to secure financing.

Spalding said after the inauguration that developers are "within a couple sentences" of closing the deal.

"We have to wait our turn," she said. "We can't change world affairs."

Ray Paradowski, chairman of the RCCC board of trustees, also said he was confident that construction will begin soon and held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart to show how close developers are to securing a loan.

RCCC will move its biotech programs to Kannapolis when the \$26 million building opens. Leaders hope to offer classes there by August 2010.

Community colleges specialize in customizing classes to fit the needs of local employers. RCCC is critical to recruiting companies to the Research Campus, founder David Murdock said.

RCCC will "enhance and expand employment in our community and raise the standard of living for everyone," said Murdock, the billionaire owner of Dole Food Co.

Murdock called himself a "linthead" and recalled owning the town's textile manufacturing plant years ago. After Pillowtex went bankrupt, he bought back the abandoned mill in 2004 to create the Research Campus.

Now, Kannapolis is a center of "intellectual stimulation" instead of textiles, he said.

"I'm proud, proud, proud to be some small part" of Spalding's future, Murdock said.

Carl Ford, chairman of the Rowan County commissioners, said he worked in the mill and played in the A.L. Brown High School band, which performed for the inauguration.

With Spalding's arrival and the construction of a new classroom building at the Salisbury campus, Ford declared "a new era of growth and advancement" for RCCC.

Spalding, who interviewed for the job one year before her inauguration, already has displayed the leadership the college was seeking, said Wayne Troutman, president of the RCCC Foundation and a college trustee.

"She has surpassed our greatest hopes and shown initiative beyond our wildest dreams," Troutman said.

Gone are the days when someone could get a good job at the mill with no high school diploma, Spalding said.

She challenged Rowan and Cabarrus counties to put a higher premium on education.

"Our two counties and our state must now change their values and beliefs to reflect this new knowledge about the new economy," she said. "This community must raise the educational aspirations of its sons and daughters and its mothers and fathers."

RCCC soon will enhance online learning, add more degrees online and offer a weekend college, Spalding said.

The college will expand teaching methods to include the Socratic method and focus on teaching students critical thinking skills.

RCCC will serve as a "flagship" for community colleges in its partnership with the Research Campus, creating biotech careers and green jobs, she said.

"The best way to predict the future is to invent it," she said.

Spalding pledged to retain the college's hallmark as an "open door" institution that welcomes students from all racial, ethnic and socio economic groups.

"I am encouraged by the opportunities before us, daunted by the complexities that confront us, inspired by the students we serves and by my colleagues who attend to those students," she said.

Spalding served as the Open Campus president of Florida Community College at Jacksonville before coming to RCCC. She and her husband, Dr. Francis Koster, live in Kannapolis.

Spalding replaces Dr. Richard Brownell, who served as RCCC president for more than 30 years. The school's first president was C. Merrill Hamilton, who took office in 1961.

This marked RCCC's first presidential inauguration. In honor of the event, the school's Machining Technology Program created a 5-pound ceremonial aluminum mace that was carried by faculty, as well as an intricate medallion that Paradowski presented to Spalding.

English faculty member Robert Abbate wrote the inaugural poem, which called on Spalding to "give hope to the jobless with sweat dried brows."

"We take up our passports to the future, unafraid and confident the journey does not end in the ruins of a factory," Abbate recited, "but steps toward endless learning that endures."