



## **Brownell's legacy secure**

***Retiring RCCC president calls creation of Concord campus greatest contribution***

By Justin Vick

[jvick@independenttribune.com](mailto:jvick@independenttribune.com)

Sunday, May 25, 2008

---

SALISBURY - When Richard Brownell reflects on his 30 years as president of Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, he takes the most pride in the creation of its South Campus in Concord.

Brownell's vision to expand into Cabarrus County transformed the small technical institute, known as Rowan Tech, into North Carolina's first regional multi-campus college.

And the college has played a role in luring business and industry to Cabarrus County, such as Philip Morris USA, with the development of tailored training programs.

Perhaps Brownell's biggest challenge in creating the South Campus was getting leaders in Cabarrus and Rowan counties to share his vision, while fending off the likes of Stanly Community College from staking the territory as its own.

Classes began in spring 1991 after more than a decade of lobbying leaders in both counties.

"Rowan-Cabarrus Community College stands as one of the successful joint ventures of both counties working together," said Brownell's longtime protégé, Jerry Chandler.

Chandler will become acting president of the college when Brownell's retirement goes into effect next Sunday.

"He has touched a lot of lives during his tremendous 30-year career," said Katrina Miller, a retired business instructor who taught in the early years of the South Campus.

### **Establishing the vision**

Prior to his lengthy career in education, Brownell served 20 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, beginning with two combat tours during the Korean War.

Brownell assumed he had reached the pinnacle of his professional career when he retired as a lieutenant colonel in July 1970.

During his military service, Brownell was exposed to strategic planning concepts that originated in the Defense Department and were later adopted by corporations. He carried those principles with him to higher education.

Brownell entered a doctoral leadership program at Duke University that recruited proven leaders for community college leadership. He held various administrative roles in higher education prior to becoming president of Rowan Tech in September 1977.

He said it didn't take long to realize his vision for expansion into Cabarrus County, which didn't have its own community college at the time.

Brownell said there never would have been a multi-campus regional college had it not been for the visioning process based on a Danish proverb framed outside his office: "We live in the present in the light of the future."

"The future is not waiting to happen," Brownell said. "There are bits and pieces of the future in the present right now. The very energy of looking at a certain future brings that future into the present."

Brownell's vision was influenced by the changing economic and demographic characteristics of North Carolina, particularly the Charlotte region.

"Textiles certainly dominated this region more than any single manufacturing agency, yet we saw back then that the writing was on the wall - that textiles were beginning to lose their magic," Brownell said.

He also saw the potential Charlotte had to be an economic dynamo in the South, and what that meant for adjacent communities such as Concord.

However, he got the sense that counties and their municipalities didn't communicate with each other about regional issues. He had to convince others to buy into his vision.

### **Gathering the troops**

Brownell said he didn't create the South Campus alone.

He views leadership as a group model, crediting community leaders, advisory councils, trustees, his senior leadership team and staff for embracing the concept.

Before there was a South Campus, Rowan Tech had small continuing education centers scattered in many locations within Cabarrus County in the 1970s, said Jeanie Moore, RCCC's vice president for continuing education.

"The leadership team at that time recognized growth was coming out of Charlotte and affecting Cabarrus County," Moore said. "It was a matter of time before they were going to need a community college."

Brownell spent much of the first five years of his presidency promoting the benefits of Rowan Tech expanding into Cabarrus County.

"It costs twice as much to have two little colleges," Brownell said. "And little colleges would not have the resources necessary to meet the needs of this giant that was slumbering and getting ready to wake up."

In 1982, the college created the Cabarrus County Advisory Committee, a group of prominent citizens charged with gaining support for the expansion.

"It was just a hard-fought battle building consensus," said Betty McCrary, wife of the committee's chairman, the late Bill McCrary. "He knew it was a tough issue, but (my husband) was very passionate about it."

She recalled a newspaper story that quoted her husband paraphrasing David Farragut's infamous Civil War order, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!"

The growing support of Cabarrus leaders led to Rowan Tech being designated the school of record for Cabarrus County over the likes of Stanly Community College, Brownell said.

The momentum led to a \$2 million allocation from the General Assembly for a Cabarrus facility in 1986, followed by a local bond referendum that yielded \$2.2 million toward the creation of the South Campus.

The college changed its name to Rowan-Cabarrus Community College in 1987 to reflect its regional mission.

### **Lobbying for dollars**

Brownell said that perhaps the college's greatest achievement is also its greatest weakness.

The biggest challenge since launching the Concord campus has been getting multi-campus funding from the state, Brownell said.

The college has lobbied for years for more funding, but has only received partial multi-campus funding, which only covers half of the costs necessary to provide both campuses with student services and technology in the classroom.

That puts more emphasis on increasing enrollment to make up the difference, said Robert Keeney, RCCC's chief financial officer.

The college had to scrutinize spending in 2007-08, given enrollment declines from the previous year.

Keeney predicted a better outlook for the 2008-09 budget, particularly if the state legislature grants the college additional multi-campus funding for the Cabarrus Business & Technology Center in Concord.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools recently upgraded the location to a full-service campus capable of offering complete degree programs.

At his last board meeting, earlier this month, Brownell encouraged college trustees to continue lobbying for multi-campus funding after his departure.

He believes there will be more buy-in as more multi-campus community colleges emerge.

### **Enhancing the community**

RCCC has proven to be a recruiting tool for area business and industry looking at locating to Cabarrus County.

Before Orlando-based Connexions signed a lease in Concord's International Business Park in 2006, the county economic development officials put the call center in contact with RCCC.

Connexions officials said at the time that the tailored training programs offered by RCCC proved to be a factor in moving to Concord.

RCCC played a similar role in luring Philip Morris USA to build a manufacturing facility in Concord in 1981. Company officials also met with the college in regards to work force development training, Brownell said.

And to this day, RCCC has helped train Philip Morris employees and their families to re-enter the work force as the cigarette manufacturer phases out its Concord operations by 2010.

RCCC has been tested in recent years by a volatile economy, most notably the closing of textile giant Pillowtex in 2004 and the emergence of the billion-dollar North Carolina Research Campus in 2005.

Brownell said the Pillowtex closing was among the hardest blows the college had ever faced.

"We were already full at that time because the displaced worker phenomenon had been going on for some time," Brownell said. "I must say that was one of the few times I really had been discouraged."

The college made a crucial decision to focus its resources on re-educating displaced workers rather than fill needed administrative support positions.

Billionaire David Murdock's 2005 announcement that he would build a biotechnology hub, dubbed the North Carolina Research Campus, at the site of the old mill, provided the college a renewed sense of purpose.

The college quickly formed biotechnology degree programs, as well as a career development center in Kannapolis, to prepare the work force for an influx of jobs the research campus is expected to attract.

"I wish I could jump in the fountain of youth for another 30 years of my life and stay in the game, because it's going to be a very exciting period," Brownell said.

Brownell said he dreads retirement, since the college has consumed much of his life.

His retirement this month will close the book on the longest community college presidency in North Carolina history.

He credited his longevity to great staff and trustees, as well as the unpredictable work environment.

"I love this place," he said. "If this had been a small college in one county where I'd be playing golf all the time, I would be bored. It's been exhausting, but wonderful."