

## On the Threshold HOW TECHNICAL EDUCATION OPENS THE PASSAGE TO OPPORTUNITY

*By Dr. Freida Hill, President  
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**I**f education is the key to solving many societal woes, then technical education in particular is the very portal to the hopes of tomorrow. Experts agree that up to 85 percent of the jobs of the future will require postsecondary education — but not necessarily, and most probably not, a four-year degree.

That puts technical education at the vanguard of an exciting new movement shaping our society. Today, employers want workers with targeted training; workers are seeking fulfilling jobs; and folks are rediscovering enrichment through community involvement. Technical colleges are opening doors to help realize these goals.

As the institutions that train local workers for new and existing companies, technical colleges are becoming critical for economic development. These businesses need a qualified workforce to operate cost-effectively, and our programs graduate the skilled employees businesses need to thrive. It's a synergistic model where business and industry support our college, and our college supports local business and industry.

At Southwest Georgia Technical College, nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in our relationship with Archbold Medical Center.

Long before I came to Thomasville nearly three years ago to lead this fine college, a great and enduring partnership existed with the Archbold healthcare family. Recently, Archbold President Ken Beverly demonstrated the hospital's philosophy about customer service and employee training



when employees were offered a \$500 bonus if they completed our Certified Customer Service Specialist program.

And over the years, a mutually beneficial arrangement has evolved, with Archbold helping us start new programs and then hiring our graduates. We, in turn, supply them with well-trained workers in an era of severe labor shortages in the healthcare industry.

For example, Archbold helped us establish our Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) program, which prepares students to sit for the registered nurse (RN) licensure exam. After 40 years of providing licensed practical nurses (LPNs) in our service area, we recently admitted a huge first class of 56 ADN students in response to the need for RNs. (We're only the fourth Georgia technical college to offer the ADN program. Athens Tech was first, followed by Columbus Tech and Northwestern Tech.)

Launching an ADN program is no easy task. The associated costs in salary alone are enormous. In the two years it takes to establish the curriculum — a period required by the Georgia Board of Nursing —

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a program director must be on board from the outset, followed thereafter by four full-time faculty members. This takes place even before the first student is admitted. But thankfully, Archbold funded our program director position until we could obtain state funding.

Our role in supplying not only nurses but also allied health professionals is tied to Archbold's large network of healthcare facilities in the area. For a town its size,



Thomasville boasts an impressive healthcare system. Archbold's success over the years attracted more and more specialists, which then fueled the need for increasing numbers of allied health workers.

Thus, Southwest Georgia Technical College has become the area's primary institution for training surgical technologists, respiratory therapists, medical laboratory technologists and some 10 other allied health professionals. And like nursing, nearly all of these professions are experiencing shortages.

Our ability to mitigate these shortages is not limited by local business support, since Archbold and other healthcare firms are enthusiastically stepping up to the plate to partner with us. Nor is it limited by a small pool of candidates or a lack of interest in healthcare careers. Indeed, we received more than 400 applications for the 56 ADN slots.

The truth is, our ability to help is limited only by space. Our five modulars on campus will still be needed even after our new classroom/administrative building is completed early next year. Current efforts to accommodate our new ADN students will become even more challenging in January when we admit approximately 30 LPN students enrolled in the "bridge program" to the ADN — and again next summer when we accept the second class of ADN students.

Nevertheless, we are going ahead as planned because the needs of our community demand it. We look upon this as an opportunity to test our proficiency in the logistics of scheduling classrooms and lab space. Actually, it's a nice problem to have.

Southwest Georgia Technical College fulfills its social responsibility as doggedly as it does its academic responsibility. Our faculty, staff and students display an amazing commitment to their community. Why? Like Georgia's other



technical colleges, most of our students come from our service area. Their desire to stay here, work here and belong here imbues them with a heavy investment in their community.

Plus, they observe the examples set by our faculty and staff. Following their lead, our students have collected toys and held food drives for the underprivileged, raised money for the March of Dimes and collected items for battered women. Respiratory therapy students serve as counselors at a five-day camp for asthmatic children. Last Christmas, our industrial electrical instructor and 12 students volunteered their own time and tools to wire a home for a woman living without electricity.

And when the town of Thomasville adopted the USS Theodore Roosevelt, our Student Council joined the effort, dubbed Operation Yellow Ribbon. Students collected and boxed up 150 cartons full of items — books, CDs, movies, personal hygiene items, postcards and stamps — to send to the troops on board this ship. It was great fun for us and rewarding too. Just think how those troops felt to know that some little town in South Georgia cared about them.



**Sailors on the USS Theodore Roosevelt open boxes of items sent by the town of Thomasville. "It was a big morale boost," reported one of the crew members.**

My goals for Southwest Georgia Technical College mirror those of my colleagues in technical colleges around the state. I want our students to train on the latest and best equipment so they're prepared when they enter the workplace. I want our faculty, staff and students to have nice facilities. I want our students, when they leave, to tell others that this is the best college they could attend anywhere.

And I want them to come back! Maybe someday serve as a trustee or a board member, or help us in a capital campaign drive — just continue to be involved. If their current acts of citizenship are any indication, I know they will come back.

In this way, technical education will have served as their entry to a promising future. **R**