

# The Herald-Sun

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## Answers for tomorrow's workforce right here in our backyard

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DURHAM -- Northern Virginia and North Carolina's Triangle area have a lot of things in common. In particular, they both have thriving, knowledge-based economies with thousands of jobs in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math)-related fields. The vast majority of these are good-paying jobs and will require more training than a high-school diploma. But, in the next 10 years, both areas are facing a shortage of 'middle-skill' workers in STEM fields: those who need some post-secondary training, but not necessarily a bachelor's degree. Where will these workers come from?

On Oct.29, the Durham Technical Community College Foundation held its annual Scholarship Breakfast. This year, it was made even more memorable due to the insightful comments made by keynote speaker Robert G. Templin Jr., the former president of Northern Virginia Community College. Templin began his talk by drawing a comparison between the Triangle region and the Northern Virginia area where he still lives.

Templin noted that in Durham alone there are between 4,500 and 6,000 disconnected youth who are either at significant risk of dropping out of high school, or who are not pursuing education, training or employment of any sort. "How do we transform these 'opportunity youth' into community assets by training them to fill the middle-skill job requirements?" he challenged.

Templin pointed to the partnership with MDC's "Made in Durham" initiative as critical in creating a "collective impact" strategy that partners public schools, the community college, and employers.

“Durham Tech is the lynchpin to Made in Durham’s potential success in transforming ‘disconnected youth’ into ‘opportunity youth.’ It’s your community’s best hope of not only meeting the workforce requirements for middle-skill workers to maintain your vibrant economy, it’s your best hope in helping to build a sustainable and humane community where all residents live and prosper together,” he said with conviction.

“Durham Tech has offered you the opportunity to fulfill your potential and achieve the American Dream,” Templin said. Then, in closing, he quoted Mark Twain: “Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do...Explore. Dream. Discover.”

Durham Tech is one of the nation’s leading community colleges, one of only 50 in the nation ranked as a “Leader College” by Achieving the Dream, a comprehensive non-governmental non-profit reform movement focused on community college student success. Community colleges remain the nation’s gateway to good jobs for those millions of students who dream of better opportunity. As president of Durham Technical Community College, I am acutely sensitive to the fact that we cannot change the lives of these disconnected youth by ourselves – we need the help of the community.

At our Scholarship Breakfast in October, more than 100 students were rewarded for their hard work, persistence and accomplishments at the college level. Some were based on academic performance, while others were recognized for their achievements in specific industry fields such as engineering or practical nursing. It’s sometimes hard to tell who is more proud: the students, their families, the instructors, or those who fund the scholarships. It’s always my favorite event of the year. These graduates are prepared to enter today’s competitive workforce. They’re one job interview away from connecting to the sustainable and humane community that Templin described.

To quote the Achieving the Dream website, “student success means so much more than a personal goal secured. It means improved skills, better employability, and economic growth for families, communities, and our nation as a whole.”

Durham Tech is supremely fortunate to be situated in an area that is renowned worldwide as a leader in creativity, culture, and diversity, not to mention its entrepreneurial spirit. Durham has the resources, the energy and the talent to forge strategic partnerships among education, government and industry to maximize the “collective impact” on our students, our youth – our future. We hold the answer to questions about tomorrow’s workforce right here in our own backyard. Twenty years from now, I don’t want to be disappointed by the things we didn’t do.