

Written Testimony of Dr. Vicki P. Karolewics, President,  
Wallace State Community College – Hanceville  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education

Good morning Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to speak on the topic of Career Preparation. As a career educator, I have devoted the last 38 years of my life to serving community college students and employers in the great state of Alabama, so today I speak to you with the voice of a community college. Wallace State Community College is uniquely positioned in the heart of north Alabama, where more than half of the state's 5.2 million citizens reside within a 60-mile radius of our main campus. Wallace State is a rural college, located in Hanceville, Alabama, whose population is 3,300. Yet, Wallace State enjoys a large enrollment of 6,400 degree-seeking credit students and more than 2,000 workforce or non-credit students last fall semester. Our traditional student body is largely non-traditional - single mothers, working parents, older adults, dislocated workers, first generation students, 68% are female, 60% attend part-time, and 30% are over the age of 25. Our mission is to provide education that transforms lives and communities, and everything we do is focused on assuring Alabama has a talent pipeline for the workforce of tomorrow.

This is an era of change for our great nation's community colleges, whose historical mission prioritized access, assuring that all people had financial access to affordable postsecondary education. Over the last decade, we have increasingly prioritized completion, and the student success agenda led to significant reforms. Today, however, we are laser focused on creating economic and social mobility for our students to assure they earn credentials that are aligned to workforce demands, stackable credentials that have workforce value, and we assess the extent to which our graduates attain post-completion success upon entering the workforce and earn a family sustaining wage. Our workforce programs are primarily concentrated in the Middle Skills Jobs space, and as Anthony Carnavale of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce said, "These middle skills workers are vital to the American economy and to their local communities. They include air traffic controllers, dental hygienists, radiation therapists, and veterinary technicians. They provide emergency and nonemergency medical services, keep our heating and air conditioning running and maintain our telecommunications infrastructure. Without them, the economy and society as we know it would struggle to function."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, “Early-career middle skills workers in these jobs not only outearn most young workers with a bachelor’s degree but also experience considerable earnings growth over time, with median annual earnings that rise to \$80,000 by mid-career (ages 36-49).”<sup>2</sup>

How does Wallace State help students maximize their earnings and employment potential? Their return on investment (ROI)? How have we maximized student outcomes? Wallace State has been recognized four times as an Aspen Institute top 150 community colleges in America because of the progress we have made in our student success reforms and in the improvement in student retention and completion. Today, Wallace State Community College is an Aspen finalist, one of only ten community colleges in the nation to be recognized by the Aspen Institute for the quality of our student outcomes. Our overarching strategic goal for student success reforms was *Readiness*<sup>3</sup>, which meant to assure that our students are *Ready for College, Ready for Work, and Ready for Life* by promoting strategies to help them *Start Early, Start Right, Finish, and Succeed*. Simply stated, we utilized *Pathways* and *Partnerships* to accomplish our *Readiness*<sup>3</sup> reform agenda.

*Pathways.* Wallace State’s completion agenda began more than a decade ago, when the college’s graduation rate was 20%. The college prioritized reducing the numbers of students who began their college journey in developmental/remedial education and accelerating students to completion. At Wallace State, the percentage of developmental students passing the gateway mathematics and English courses has increased from 68% in 2014-15 to 84% in 2022-23. In 2017-18, there were 1,061 unduplicated enrollments in developmental courses with a success rate of 75%. In the most recent year, the unduplicated enrollments dropped to 630 with almost the same success rate, 72%. This marks a 41% decrease in the number of developmental/remedial enrollments, saving students and their families time and thousands of dollars, and accelerating them to completion. Wallace State subsequently led a redesign of the curriculum statewide, collapsing all developmental courses into one developmental course for mathematics and one for composition, adding an aggressive three-tiered co-requisite placement model to ensure that the default pathway became gateway courses, resulting in a 71% decrease in developmental credit hours over time.

Our Pathways work was advanced through the design and implementation of Guided Pathways as an organizational model, which included curricular alignment designed to accelerate students to completion of credentials having workforce value in middle skills jobs and to university transfer for a

similarly valuable bachelor's degree. The curricular alignment is closely tied to labor market data and to our partners in industry and education – both K-12 and university. An important strategy has been the creation of stacked credentials, particularly in Applied Technologies (CTE). Because so many community college students stop out before earning a two-year degree, latticed credentials enable students to leave with marketable credentials at multiple points in their progress. In Mechatronics, Welding, Machine Tool, and Engineering alone, students can earn more than 38 short- and long-term certificates. Since 2015 the college has added more than 200 stacked certificates and other industry recognized credentials, such as NC3 certifications. This redesign greatly increased graduation rates among Applied Technologies students, from 31% in 2013-14 to 59% in 2022-23, an overall 90% increase. Because most graduates remain in the service area of the college, this progression contributes greatly to increasing per capita income.

*Partnerships.* Essential to our success are the partnerships we cultivate with business and industry, K-12, universities, healthcare, non-profits, and government. One of the most valuable strategies the college has employed to enable students to maximize their employment and earnings potential is work-based learning. Earn and learn opportunities, such as apprenticeships and internships, connect students to high value middle skill jobs along the pathway to completion, maximizing their earnings potential at graduation through higher starting salaries. One of the college's high impact programs is our NCAL FAME program. Wallace State partnered with industry leaders to develop the North Central Alabama Federation for Advanced Manufacturing Education and to create a curriculum that is aligned with employers' requirements, adopting the Advanced Manufacturing Technician (AMT) model that was developed by Toyota in an earn and learn format. AMTs attend classes two days a week and work at least 24 hours a week for a local, sponsoring employer, earning a competitive wage. In some cases, sponsoring employers also provide additional financial support, so that AMTs can graduate debt free. NCAL FAME partners with 25 employers, including AgCo, Alabama Cardington, Yutaka Technologies, Royal Technologies, American Cast Iron Pipe Corporation, C&A Automation, Dynetics, EZB SysTec, GE Appliances, Mazda-Toyota, YKTA, Royal Technologies, Orchid Orthopedic Solutions, RWC, HomTex, HFI, Jack Daniel Cooperidge, KAMTEK and Cerrowire. A key feature of the program is that industry earn and learn partners not only mentor and train students, but also employ students post-completion at a higher wage. To date, 88% of the students received full-time job offers at a higher starting wage in mid-

level positions. Starting above entry-level maximizes their education and skills, and leads to significantly more financial growth.

Another partnership and integrated pathway that have yielded significant return on investment for graduates is the concurrent ADN/BSN degree - Joint Enrollment – with the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) School of Nursing and Athens State University. As a rural serving community college, Wallace State's partnerships and healthcare pathways not only substantially increases graduates' earning capacity with the bachelor's degree, but also increase the available nursing workforce to rural Alabama. Additionally, Wallace State also developed the first nursing apprenticeship in partnership with UAB Hospital, which has now expanded to twenty healthcare facilities.

A Workforce Opportunities for Rural Communities Grant was a catalyst for developing a one-of-a-kind Diesel by Distance program, providing flexible learning options for students geographically distant and pursuing careers in diesel technology. The program serves dual enrollment students, incumbent workers who are geographically immobile, and the emerging workforce. Diesel by Distance seamlessly integrates online and virtual reality classes with hands-on training through scheduled just-in-time, in-person skill validation sessions during evenings and weekends. One of the most significant aspects of this earn and learn program model is its dedication to recruiting and retaining women, persons of color, and adult learners, and its reliance on employer partnerships. It is noteworthy that the very first enrollee was a female, single mother from south Alabama, and her employer sponsor was Altec. She attended tuition free and is now employed at a higher wage than had she not had the earn and learn experience.

Perkins funding and a Tech Prep Demonstration Project Grant were used to develop a longstanding Early College program – Fast Track. The Fast Track program partners with our 36 service area high schools to enable high school juniors and seniors to *Start Early* – they are enrolled full-time on Wallace State's campus, completing their junior and senior year of high school and their high school diploma through dual enrollment pathways to the associate degree. The program has graduated and transferred almost 1,000 high school students since its inception, with a completion rate higher than our native population. These students maximize their employment and earnings potential by entering the workforce two years earlier than their high school peers.

Finally, workforce programs offering rapid training at low or no-cost are critical to maximizing the employment and earnings potential, especially for persons experiencing recovery, a disability, or housing

insecurities. The Alabama Community College System developed a unique rapid short-term training solution that is funded by the Alabama Legislature and offered at no cost to Alabama residents. The training consists of an on-line, virtual theory portion accompanied by short-term hands-on training in careers such as Heavy Equipment Operator, Fiber Optics Technician, Medication Assistant, and Nursing Support Technician. This workforce credit pathway recently enrolled a class of five men in a CDL driver training program who were residents of the Royal Pines Recovery Program, completing the program in just a few weeks at no cost to them. At the conclusion all five men were offered Truck Driver jobs by R. E. Garrison, jobs that pay far more than a living wage in our area. Additionally, in partnership with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Wallace State developed a program specifically designed to offer CDL training for persons confined to wheelchairs, and have trained five persons with disabilities to date, most were Veterans, and all are employed. A living wage in the region Wallace State serves is \$40,000 annually, and labor market data reveal median annual earnings for tractor-trailer truck drivers was \$49,348, and those jobs are listed among the top 5 of the 20 largest occupations in our service area.

In conclusion, oftentimes the greatest challenge and barrier to maximizing student outcomes is Wallace State's finite capacity to build programs and services to offer more Pathways and build more Partnerships that are lifechanging for many of the students we serve. The programs funded by Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education are exponentially influential in enabling community colleges in general and Wallace State in particular to not only complete a degree or credential, but most importantly to earn a living wage, and a family sustaining wage that leads to intergenerational change through social and economic mobility. Thank you for the honor of presenting testimony to this Subcommittee.

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<sup>1</sup>Carnavale, Anthony; *Small Towns, Big Opportunities*, 2024

<sup>2</sup>Strohl, Jeff; *The Great Misalignment*, 2024

<sup>3</sup>Wyner, Josh; *Community College 3.0: What's Next for the Student Success Agenda?*