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THE SUN SHINES FOR DEVER

TNCC president reflects on highs, lows after 'exceptionally challenging year' on campus

BY MATT JONES

Staff writer

Of course he was wearing the tie.

The faculty of the communications and humanities division at Thomas Nelson Community College gave him the tie, styled to look like an illuminated medieval manuscript, when he left the college for the first time after 20 years as a professor and division head.

He wore it under his robes when he was inaugurated as TNCC president in 2011.

He wore it to a retirement celebration put on by the college Dec. 13, and he's wearing it in his official portrait.

John Dever, 74, will retire in mid-January amid personal health issues, as the college continues its attempts to recover from a serious financial crisis. Presenting him with an award for his service, vice president for academic affairs and workforce development Susan English called it a "very challenging year."

"Two thousand nineteen has been a difficult year for me personally," Dever said during his remarks at the celebration, "and as Dr. English mentioned, it's been an exceptionally challenging year for the college."

The former English professor concluded his speech by reading the lyrics of a song, slowly, like it was a Shakespeare sonnet.

Here comes the sun.

Here comes the sun, and I say

It's all right.

Before TNCC

Dever could've been a priest.

He attended a seminary his sophomore and junior years of high school. In an interview, he blamed it on a combination of youthful idealism and a drive to help people.

"I've been able to, through the community colleges, realize the idealism I have to serve others," Dever said. "That's of course a different way than through organized religion."

The son of a car dealer from Lebanon, Kentucky, Dever was the youngest of three boys. After he quit seminary, he wanted to follow his oldest brother to Notre Dame College in Ohio.

He got in, but his father's small-town car dealership had fallen on hard times. Notre Dame offered him only a \$25 scholarship.

Instead, he studied history at Bellarmine College in Louisville, a small Catholic liberal arts college that had just opened in 1950. Bellarmine, where he said he really discovered his love of literature, offered him a full ride.

"This happened to me time and time again," Dever said. "I didn't get my first wish, but it all worked out, probably for the better in the end."



JOHN CLARK/FREELANCE

John Dever sits with his granddaughter Brooke at his retirement reception Friday at the Peninsula Workforce Development Center. Dever began his career at Thomas Nelson in 1975.

He taught high school for a few years before going to the University of Kentucky to get a master's degree in English. Dever was about to move to Texas in search of a job when he got a call from a former classmate who taught at Parkersburg Community College in West Virginia.

Someone had just quit and they needed an instructor urgently. Could he come tomorrow and interview?

The next day, Dever and a professor from UK made the drive. The college gave him the job, kicking off a community college career that would last for the next 45 years.

"I think what I particularly liked was the openness, giving everyone a shot at education," Dever said. "I have a strong egalitarian streak in me."

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DEVER

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From professor to administrator

When Dever arrived at TNCC in fall 1975, enrollment hadn't quite cracked 4,000 students.

Turner Spencer, a professor emeritus of biology and former Hampton City Council member, joined the faculty when the college opened in 1968. His first impression of Dever was his height.

"I can see him visually now walking across campus," Spencer said. "He never walked very fast, but it was always very steady, very astute. And I said to myself, 'One of these days John is going to be a president!'"

Eugene Wingo is another original professor and division head of science and mathematics from 1970 from 2000.

At Dever's request, he was Dever's son's academic adviser at TNCC. Seth Dever graduated from the community college summa cum laude before going to the University of Virginia and earning a Ph.D. from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Wingo and Dever were members of the "Cabin Gang." A group of six or so administrators would go together monthly to a cabin owned by one of the division chairs on the Chickahominy River. They'd stay up late, play cards and talk politics.

"I used to tell people I'm sworn to secrecy — as a joke," Wingo said. "We just had a great time."

Dever finished a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in English while he was at TNCC. But for most of his time as an instructor, he didn't aspire to run the college.

Robert Templin, president from 1986 to 1994, changed that. He told Dever early on he was going to turn him into an administrator.

"I said, 'No you're not,'" Dever laughed. "He won."

Once he started as interim division head for humanities and communications, it started to grow on him. He liked being able to clear obstacles for faculty, to help make their ambitions for their students happen.

"It was having your fingers on the levers that could make change possible that kind of got into my blood," Dever said.

Dealing with decline

TNCC faced almost the opposite problem it has now when Dever

became president.

In the years after the 2008 financial crisis, community college enrollment across the state was soaring. In fall 2011, TNCC had a headcount of just under 11,000.

But in subsequent years, as the economy has improved and unemployment dropped, enrollment has cratered, something the Virginia Community College System attributes to lessening demand for job training. About 7,300 students enrolled at TNCC in fall 2019, according to preliminary headcount numbers, the equivalent of 4,142 full-time students.

For Dever, it was something he'd never encountered. Every department, every college he'd been an administrator at, had experienced growth while he was there.

"It just so happened that I came as the economy has started to recover," Dever said. "I've been fated with the issues associated with enrollment decline during my time."

Dever cites a litany of accomplishments during his eight years: a longlist of new credential programs in response to workforce needs, the completion of a new digital sign advertising the college's Hampton campus and approval from the state to build a \$38 million new academic building.

TNCC has made improvements to academic advising and career coaching, according to increasing scores in student surveys. There's more tutoring and other support services, and the admissions process has gotten a lot more streamlined, which Dever said has had a noticeable effect.

"When I got here, we got a lot of complaints that would come to the office," Dever said. "We don't get any complaints anymore."

But the last few years of his presidency have been defined by financial difficulties. In 2017, the college cut a half-dozen positions to address a deficit, and Dever announced this spring that TNCC's 20-person housekeeping staff would all be laid off.

The most pressing issue surfaced in July, when Dever announced that a series of budget and financial errors — from an unauthorized internal loan to incorrect budget data provided to administrators — left TNCC short about \$1.8 million at the end of last fiscal year.

In late October, Dever announced that 45 employees would be laid off.

The college has implemented new financial policies and controls, but budgets will continue to be tight

for the foreseeable future. Enrollment is forecast to continue falling.

"I wish it hadn't happened," Dever said. "But I've learned a lot from dealing with it, and I hope that how we've handled it has been professional and done with concern for the college community."

In September, the results of the 2019 "Great Colleges To Work For" were presented to TNCC's local college board. The institution scored the worst on senior leadership, which also saw the largest drop of any category since the last survey in 2016.

"I think it's communication more than anything else — people just need to feel it," Dever said. "And although I think we made a lot of efforts, the more I think about it, I probably should have done more."

Rising to the role

Becoming president wasn't initially part of Dever's plan.

After he left the college in 1995, he worked as dean of instruction and student services at Blue Ridge Community College in Weyers Cave. He rented an apartment nearby and made the drive back to Newport News every weekend to be with his wife Peggy and their two kids, Seth Dever and Sarah Sullivan.

They had met during the year Dever taught in Parkersburg. She followed him to Newport News, working as plant clerk at the James River Wastewater Treatment Plant, less than a mile from their house.

She died in May 2016. They'd been married for 39 years.

"He was very committed to my mother," Sullivan said, "even after she passed away."

In 2000, Dever took a job as vice president of academic and student affairs at Tidewater Community College, which allowed him to stay at home. He rented another apartment in 2004 so he could be executive vice president for academic and student services at Northern Virginia Community College, working for Robert Templin, the president who gave him his first administration job.

A small delegation of faculty from Northern Virginia came to Dever's retirement ceremony. History professor Charles Errico said that that Dever was the "heart and soul" of the school and helped found its honors program.

At Dever's suggestion, they'd sometimes hold honors committee meetings at Errico's home near NOVA's Annandale campus. Everyone would bring a bottle of wine and snacks.

"It's the only meeting in which our dog made it into the minutes every time," Errico said. "The honors program is flourishing because of John's leadership, and so much else."

Dever had anticipated retiring at the end of his time at NOVA. His wife had been diagnosed with ALS and her condition was declining.

"I knew that I had to come back," Dever said. "It just so happened that at that very moment the position became open at Thomas Nelson."

The job allowed him to care for his wife in the evenings and on weekends, with the help of health care aids during the work week. He also had the support of his family and daughter, who lives with her husband and five children two doors down from him.

"She knew I wanted to make things happen and accomplish things," Dever said of his wife. "I wasn't happy unless I was doing that, and she was always supportive of that."

As part of his retirement, Dever is donating \$100,000 in their name to the college.

It's not a typical scholarship fund. The money is set aside for support programs to help respond to the needs of students, like those aging out of foster care or with disabilities, and to support student activities.

Dever's own health has presented a challenge, and it was the main factor behind his retirement announcement in July. He won't go into detail about it, though.

In the email announcing his retirement, he described it as a "major health issue."

"It has not prevented me from functioning, but I also know I'm paying a price for that," Dever said.

When his last day does come in January, Dever hopes to spend more time with his seven grandchildren. He already eats dinner every night with his daughter and her family.

"He's a really good grandfather," Sullivan said. "They all love him."

Passing the torch

The last time TNCC had an interim president, he stayed for three years.

Charles Taylor, president since 2004, announced he'd take a nine-month "leave of absence" to work on a research project for VCCS in a campus email in September 2008. Earlier that year, the faculty senate passed a "no confidence" resolution in him rebuking his leadership.

Alvin Schexnider took over as interim president. When Taylor's

contract quietly expired the next summer, he became the permanent president, holding the post until Dever took it.

Gregory DeCinique, who was the president of Jamestown Community College in New York for 20 years, will take the reins over from Dever now. More recently, VCCS chancellor DuBois appointed him interim president of Tidewater Community College starting in July 2018.

A new president takes over there Jan. 6. DeCinique's first day at TNCC is Jan. 13.

"He's really learned a lot about Hampton Roads in the last year and a half. And ever since he arrived, we've had a good working relationship," Dever said.

The handover is a little later than Dever had planned for, which means there'll be a week where Susan English will be the "officer in charge." But Dever said he's satisfied that they've addressed many of the financial issues in the last six months that they needed to, which was part of why he didn't retire sooner.

"I'm really trying to send a message that my tenure has ended, but I'll be available as needed," Dever said.

DuBois, head of the system since 2001, came to a local college board meeting in late September to outline how the search will work. But, he told the board, the college needed to address its financial concerns and chart its future before the process can start.

"It won't be next week, and it won't be next year," DuBois said.

A group of representatives from across VCCS will form a search committee. DuBois expects over 80 applicants, which the committee will whittle down to about 10 to bring to interviews in Richmond.

Those will be narrowed down even more to three or four who will make public visits to TNCC. Then the final winner will be announced. DuBois anticipates it'll take six to eight months once they start the process in earnest.

"Most presidential searches I've seen, they start off with the wrong question. They start off with, 'What do we want in our next president?'" DuBois said. "And I'll tell you why that's wrong."

"Because if you ask 10 people that question, it will always add up to the Messiah. That's what it will always add up to. And the Messiah is not going to apply for this position."

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