

# WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY NEWS

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DATE MAILED: Feb. 26, 2003

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## WNC LACKS TOOLS NEEDED TO COMPETE ECONOMICALLY, BASNIGHT SAYS AT WESTERN

CULLOWHEE – Western North Carolina has not been given the tools it needs to take its “rightful place” in the economy of North Carolina, the president pro tem of the N.C. Senate told a group at Western Carolina University on Friday (Feb. 21.)

Marc Basnight flew from the coast to Cullowhee to deliver the keynote address at a summit, “Meeting Western North Carolina’s Needs Through Higher Education.” He spoke to several hundred of the region’s leaders at Western’s Ramsey Regional Activity Center.

Western scheduled the summit to give leaders an opportunity to pinpoint how the university can help address the greatest needs of the state and region.

Basnight said he agrees with a recent description by Western Chancellor John W. Bardo in which Bardo stated that there are two North Carolinas – one rich and one poor, with the poor regions at the far ends of the state.

“You have not been given your rightful place in this economy. I came to see that you are given your rightful place,” Basnight said. “Go wherever you have to and fight for your rightful place to see that your economy has the same tools that other regions of this state have.

“If you don’t have the tools, the means, the monies and the resources necessary to develop, and if you don’t have the leadership with the tools necessary to be competitive with others, it will be the same speech you’ll hear next year, and 10 years from now,” he said.

Basnight said he is aware that too many of the region’s young people have to go elsewhere to find work after they graduate from college. “I believe institutions such as this one should be given all the disciplines necessary to help the young adults living in this community. The flight of the brain trust that leaves here has been unfair, and you’re going to have to fight. We have to have educational opportunities that are great – not normal or average.”

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As an educational institution, Western needs to invite the owners of small businesses in the region to campus to “find out what they need to grow and expand,” Basnight said.

Phil Kirk, president of N.C. Citizens for Business and Industry, and chairman of the State Board of Education, told the group that Western must play a major role in developing the economy of WNC. Of all the factors affecting economic development, “it all gets down to the quality of the workforce,” he said.

“What we need are political leaders with the courage to make tough decisions. Economic development does not happen by accident. We’ve got to create more jobs that have a high knowledge content,” Kirk said.

“Western Carolina University is helping, and can continue to help, through research, analysis and public policy functions,” he said. “You can provide university-based resources and services and innovative distance learning opportunities to business and industry. You can help faculty to launch their own companies. You can assist students by helping them acquire skills to become entrepreneurs, as you’re already doing. You can do even more innovative things to involve students and faculty in real-life situations in the community,” Kirk said.

Another summit speaker, Mary Jo Waits, associate director of the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University, said the primary charge given to universities is to produce knowledge workers. Economic development is not just about “high tech,” but it is “driven by ideas that add value and quality” to products, she said.

Waits said universities need to overhaul certain “pillars” in their mission statements, such as moving from providing “service” to the business community to “networking” with those businesses.

“Service in the traditional notion is spotty,” she said. “You have to be engaged. Companies want access on an ongoing basis.”

At the conclusion of the summit, participants divided into focus groups to discuss ways in which the university can assist the region in meeting its needs in areas such as business, banking, management and finance; engineering, emerging science and biotechnology; health care; and public schools. Reports filed by those focus groups will be published at a later date.

Before the focus groups met, Bardo told participants that Western North Carolina is facing “opportunities unprecedented in the history of the region.” He advised them to not just “think outside the box,” but to “think outside the Triangle” – referring to Research Triangle Park, the high-tech research center in the middle of the state.

“It is important that the campus hear what you want from us,” he said.

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