

Awake58: An interview with President Thomas Stith of the NC Community College System
Podcast transcription

Nation Hahn: Hello, and welcome to the latest edition of the Awake58 podcast. I'm Nation Hahn. In this week's episode, we have the distinct pleasure of interviewing Thomas Stith, the 10th full-time president of the North Carolina Community College System, who began his tenure on January 11th. Stith has a big job ahead of him. We go deep with him today to find out his approach, more of his personal story, how he thinks about building teams, and what his message to the legislature will be in this upcoming session. Give it a listen.

All right, President Stith, thank you so much for joining us. We really appreciate you taking time out of what promises to be a busy first week on the payroll. Although, several weeks now into, into the role. Tell us a little bit about what you've been learning and diving in on in these first few days and first few weeks.

President Thomas Stith: Well, first and foremost Nation, I want to say thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today. One of the things I have learned is the importance of EdNC and your focus on the community college system. You along with many other North Carolina citizens realize the importance of our community college system. So since the announcement, twofold -- on a personal level, I've been making my way to Raleigh to make sure that I was ready and ready to go on January the 11th. And have been engaged from a community college point of view talking with presidents across the state, getting engaged with the Community College Board, and most importantly, talking with the tremendous team here at the system office. While there've been transition, of course, since President Hans moved over to the university system, we have a great team here at the system office and I've had the opportunity over the last couple of weeks to get to know them better, understand their visions and thought for the system, and it really has enhanced my enthusiasm even more to step in now as the 10th president of the North Carolina Community College System.

Hahn: That is excellent. I'm sure it has been drinking from a firehose these first few weeks, especially with the General Assembly getting ready to return to town, and no rest for the weary, but it sounds like you're excited about it.

Stith: Yes, I am and as you mentioned, today is first day or official day of the legislative session. And so if it wasn't a firehose before, the faucet is on now. And so I've had opportunity to talk to some of the legislative leadership and will be very engaged throughout the legislative process. You know, clearly, the General Assembly provides significant funding for the system. And I feel it's very important for them to understand what the challenges are that are faced by our presidents throughout the 58 community colleges. And so I really look forward to being the voice of the system during this session. And we're going to work extremely hard to make sure we secure the resources necessary as we move forward.

Hahn: Tell us a little bit about your story. What brought you to the, I mean, you know, I think people are curious, always, you know, what brings people to this moment in their career, but maybe you could begin at the beginning and tell us a little bit about your personal story and your background so folks can get to know you.

Stith: Sure, sure. And it was very interesting, because it really almost begins, it begins before I started. I come from a family of entrepreneurs and educators. And as I was preparing just to be engaged in the

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search process and started doing my homework, you know, you forget about your history sometimes. But my father actually started a two-year business school in Durham, North Carolina in 1956. Right before the official founding of the community college system. So I grew up in an environment that valued education, that valued the benefit of a two-year education, and also a very close alignment with business. And that's what we see with our community college system, really preparing the students, whether they're right out of high school or a displaced worker or someone that needs that additional training because a new industry has come in. I grew up in that environment. It was called Southeastern Business College. It prepared students for careers in business. I actually still have one of their early brochures, and it talked about keyboarding and shorthand and while your audience may not know what some of those terms are, but it was really preparing those students for careers in business. And so throughout my career, I have had a very strong marriage between, you know, my undergraduate and graduate degrees are in business, but also have been very closely aligned with educational issues. I owned and operated a preschool for 11 years at one point in my career. I tell folks that also prepared me for my involvement in politics, that 2- and 3-year-old behavior in preschool, you see that sometimes. I served eight years on the Durham City Council. And sometimes I would just smile and say, there's been no intervention there since that person was 2 or 3, you know, we have to learn how to work together and share sometimes. But on a serious note, I really see this role bringing together all of the experiences I've had, not only as an entrepreneur, but as I said, worked in the educational field, owned a preschool. We know children learn how to learn during their first five years of life, so it was very involved in that early learning process. At later in my career, I served five years at the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at UNC-Chapel Hill, so a good mixture between economic development and our educational institutions and how our students can engage while they are learning their trade as well. So while it was some time period coming, this role, really, as I said, was a culmination of a life's time work experience and passion for both business, business opportunities, creating jobs, and the importance of education. You know, my philosophy is that, you know, a solid education equals opportunity. And that's what our community college system represents, opportunity for all of our citizens to, to move forward.

Hahn: You mentioned your service on the Durham City Council, and certainly there are others who got to know you through your tenure as chief of staff in the governor's mansion. What drew you to public service? I mean, you touched a little bit on, you know, the need to expand opportunity and your business background. But what was it particularly about service to your community and your state that drew you in?

Stith: Yeah, that was really a personal decision as well. My first role in public service was actually with Governor Jim Martin back in 1985. I served on his team in '84. And that really gave me an indication of how impactful you can be to your community through the role of the public service, and that exposed me to it. I worked in the Martin administration for a time period and then went into the private sector. But my first elected position, the Durham City Council, was because I was raising a family in Durham and my wife and I said, you know, you can always sit on the sidelines and say, well, things ought to be this way or that way. But I decided at that point, we were in Durham raising a family there, and I was a Durham native and I decided to get involved. So that was my kind of second exposure, if you please, to public service. And that was the first elected public service that I had. And I just think it's, you know, for me, it was an innate commitment and passion to help the community that I lived in, the state that I lived in, and how can you improve the conditions or situations for people in the cities, towns, state that you,

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that you live in? I think, you know, for me, it's, I think it's a part of what we -- and everyone has a different way to serve -- but I think it's a part of why we're here. And that's to reach out and to help those around us.

Hahn: Most recently, you were at the Small Business Administration here in North Carolina, and obviously during a trying and tumultuous time for small businesses across the state with the COVID-19 pandemic. Tell us a little bit about what you learned during that post that I think will, I'm sure will, guide you in some ways as you think about the role of community colleges and our economic recovery moving forward.

Stith: A couple of things. One, and something that I knew but it reaffirmed, is just the resiliency of the people here in North Carolina. You saw small business owners and, you know, whether it was the mom and pop grocery store or you know, someone that has a small franchise, you know, just that desire to continue to move forward and continue to help those in the community. So in that role, I learned, as I said, reaffirmation of the commitment that people here in North Carolina have, the importance of our business community, small businesses, we have over 900,000 small businesses in North Carolina, but they're employing our neighbors, our families, they're providing economic opportunity to their communities. And so you know, that again reaffirmed and showed just the importance of marrying not only that, that business community, but also the importance, again, of our community colleges, because they are training those individuals in many cases that are going to work for, whether it's a small business or a large industry coming into North Carolina. So while we've, you know, certainly and still are dealing with the impact of the pandemic, that experience showed me not only from a business perspective, but how our community colleges could be effective even in the midst of a pandemic.

Hahn: I think you have answered this question, or at least portions of this question sort of sprinkled throughout our conversation so far. But when President Hans' departure was announced, what was it that attracted you to this position? I mean, it's the third largest community college system in the country, 58 campuses, 700,000 North Carolinians involved or engaged in its learning. Whether it be basic skills, workforce development, or curriculum every year. But certainly also a system faced with, you know, a number of challenges from the challenges of enrollment decline due to the pandemic over to the need to bolster faculty pay. So you're certainly stepping into a job with a lot of opportunities and also a lot of work ahead. What was it that drew you to this opportunity, knowing that, you know, you certainly could serve in any number of roles across the state or the country?

Stith: I firmly believe that the North Carolina Community College System is going to be the lead entity to lead North Carolina out of this pandemic. And it was very appealing to me, if you please, because I think it does culminate, as you mentioned, I touched on a little earlier, both my interest in the value and impact of education and business, and the community colleges exemplify that. They're preparing folks for the workforce, for economic opportunity, and to have the blessing to serve as a leader of the community college system was just very appealing to me. And so it happened at a time that, you know, a cliché, you know, it's an opportunity that you didn't want to pass on. So, you know, I was able to come through the process and be successful in being selected. But that's really what attracted me. I really and firmly believe, then and now, of the importance that the community college system is going to play

in North Carolina's future -- not only as we come out of this pandemic, but for years to come. It has been a key entity prior to the pandemic, but I think even more so now.

Hahn: Throughout the process, were there things that you learned about the system from I'm sure talking to different stakeholders that got you perhaps more excited, or at least, maybe more resolute about the challenges ahead? What did the process sort of reveal to you?

Stith: Well, I think the process, there's a lot of passion around our community college systems, whether you're talking about the individual college presidents, their trustees, that, you know, first and foremost, the Community College Board, so you have a lot of interested parties. And while you know, for some people, that may be a challenge, to me, I saw that as an opportunity. Because you have a whole lot of individuals, although they may have different lens they're looking through, that are passionate about the same goal. And that goal is our community college system and the success of our community college system. So as I went through the process, while you know, some cautioned about the governance system and the various stakeholders, I really see that as an opportunity and a benefit. Because as you bring those individuals together, you're bringing together around a common goal.

Hahn: As you think about the common goal and the work of the year ahead. I mean, we know that the legislature will be a tall task and we know that you know, that you have priorities established by the State Board, President's Association, stakeholders, including budget stabilization, which will likely run in the high 10's of millions, although we'll know those exact numbers soon. Faculty pay, that I think the price tag is 62 million. You know, certainly the state's budget situation, I think, looks more promising than people expected even a few months ago, which I think gives people some confidence and optimism and in terms of the ability to pass those priorities. You know, what, what's your message to legislators as you go out there and begin to take part in all these meetings to make the case?

Stith: It is very simple and it's what I mentioned earlier, that the North Carolina Community College System is poised to lead this recovery. And if you agree with that, and understand that whether it's workforce training, whether it's, you know, providing that opportunity for the new high school grad, if you understand the benefits that the system provides, then you also understand you have to make that investment. And you're exactly right, we're going to be talking to legislators or are already talking to legislators about having budget stability. Because of the funding formula, there could, if not provided budget stability, you could see a negative impact on the budget because of the enrollment decline. And you've seen a decline across the country in community colleges. North Carolina has fared better. But we're still facing some decline in particular with African American males and Latino males. So we have some specific areas of enrollment in general that we need to be prepared for. But there are also specific categories within that. So my message is, because of the importance and value that this system will provide moving forward, we have to prioritize the investment. In the other areas, faculty and staff salaries. These are folks, these are going to be your frontline education and training individuals, and we have to ensure that they are properly compensated, because they're going to be preparing that next generation. So while, you know, significant funding will be required, and we also are looking at ways to leverage federal funding, but there will be gaps. And I think, so far, the meetings have been very positive and individuals responsive. But as you mentioned, it's a budget process, so that's why

we've started early and we're going to be engaged throughout the process to ensure that the system has the proper resources to lead as we come out of this pandemic.

Hahn: Two more questions on the hard stuff and we may ask you a couple of questions around, you know, what you do in your spare time, which I'm sure is infrequent, but so people can get to know you a little better. But you have a number of significant vacancies at the system office at this point. And certainly, you know, it would be within your purview to restructure some of these roles. But regardless, you are now in the process, I'm sure, of thinking about how you build a team both of folks who are already there, and then folks who you may bring in from outside the system. Given that, can you tell us a little bit about your philosophy behind team building and how you think about hiring and structuring a team of folks to move forward?

Stith: Sure and I think the key is, I do realize the importance of team. While I'm you know, obviously I'm the president and have to serve what is required of a leader, I understand that. But I think as a leader, my philosophy is you are only as good as the people you surround yourself with. You're only as strong as your team. And so while we do, and we are taking a look at individuals, and the structure, but individuals that may replace the folks that have had the opportunity to pursue other careers. We also have a very strong team on the ground now. And what I've found throughout my career, when you have individuals that seek other opportunities, to me I look at it as just that -- an opportunity to strengthen the team. Whether it's me, or, you know, senior vice president, you know, the system will continue to move forward. And my charge as the leader is to ensure that we move forward in a stronger position. And that's, that's what I'm thinking through now. And as we continue to add to a very strong team, I think people will see that we will continue to move forward in a very aggressive manner and be very successful as we move into the next day.

Hahn: Well, we've covered two of your big responsibilities and only begun to touch the surface of both, I'm sure. You know, as you think about the year ahead, what else is on your list of things you sort of hope to accomplish. So that when we're sitting here a year from now, you can look back and say, "OK, I did what I came to do over the course of the first year, now I'm turning to year two."

Stith: Yeah, I think as we look forward, that will even happen now. One of my other, you know, one thing that I discussed with the search committee, a couple of things, you know, I want for the North Carolina Community College System to be the first choice for an affordable education. During the midst of the pandemic, obviously, there have been many, many impacts on families across North Carolina and I want to make sure that the system is properly positioned to be a very viable choice for any family in the state, especially when you look at the cost of higher education. Also, looking at diversity and inclusion, as I mentioned, you know, we're seeing some concerns now in our enrollment figures. But I want to be a national model for diversity and inclusion within our system and providing opportunities across the board, and also working very closely, and I think the third pillar, as we continue to move forward a year from now, is to enhance our engagement with the private sector and the business sector. Being a strong partner with not only economic development and attracting jobs, but to be a strong partner as businesses expand in the state. Because if you look at our students, you know, at the end of the day, they're there to receive a solid education or whether it's a certification so that they can go out and be viably and gainfully employed, to find opportunity, whether it's a welder, whether it's a

nurse, whether it's working in high tech. And those are really the three areas as I look down the road, in addition to what we've talked about, that I'll be focusing on as we move forward.

Hahn: For the thousands of faculty and staff and administrators across the state who haven't yet had the chance to get to know you, what's your message to them? Many of them listen to this podcast, and we're grateful for that, so do you have a message for them as the new semester or new year begins?

Stith: Well, that I acknowledge that they are and I say, you know, they're on the front lines, but they are the key to what makes our system successful. They're working day in and day out, sometimes now more virtual than in person, with those students that are going to make the difference once they graduate or receive their certification. So, one, that I value, and that's why one of our primary legislative initiatives will be to ensure that we try to reward them from a compensation point of view, to reward and recognize the work they're doing day in and day out. So that will be my primary message that you know, from the system office, from my office's perspective, that they are the key to our system, they are working day in and day out with those students and that should be recognized.

Hahn: Well, I know that every time we address faculty pay on EdNC we hear from many of them. They're certainly eager to see that happen, so they'll be pulling for you. Let's just do a couple rapid fire questions about, you know, that will give people a chance to get to know you as a person. You know, or at least a little bit of you. What's a good book you've read recently?

Stith: I am actually in the midst of reading, a very good friend and mentor of mine gave me the book *Forward*, and it made a huge impact on his life. I'm only on chapter one. Because I've been moving and relocating the family, but so far it is an excellent book and I really value his guidance. So it's the book *Forward*. It's very timely for me.

Hahn: In your infrequent spare time, do you have any hobbies that keep you busy?

Stith: What is a hobby? Not a whole lot. I guess one of my main hobbies that has been very curtailed, I do like to you know exercise. My wife and I try to watch our health. So I've been reduced really just to walking around the neighborhood. I haven't gotten back into the gym even though it's opened up. Not quite ready to make that plunge. So I guess in my spare time, I try to get a good walk in and spend time with my family. I'm very family focused. And so we've had an opportunity to get even closer, maybe too close at times, over the last several months and getting on nerves, but I would say you know, just a good walk and a good time with my family.

Hahn: Anyone who knows me or follows my work with EdNC knows that I often include stops at great restaurants along the way and that food is a passion of mine. My grandmother owned a diner and my adopted father was a butcher. So I grew up in the food industry. So at the risk of name picking favorites, do you have a favorite restaurant or two across North Carolina you want to share with us?

Stith: I would not dare to do that. I'll just say my wife's home cooking. That's the best restaurant I know.

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Hahn: Well, you cut me off, I was getting ready to ask you eastern or western barbecue, which is the age old question.

Stith: I have deep eastern North Carolina roots. My father's side of the family is from Rocky Mount and Tarboro. And my mother's Ahoskie. So I, since I'm serving the whole state now, I won't vote on eastern or western, but just know that I'm an eastern North Carolina guy.

Hahn: One of my favorite stories, there's a now-retired community college president who grew up in the east, but led a college in the west, and he still brought eastern barbecue for his trustee meetings every year, and told him they could get western barbecue when he retired. We stay loyal to our roots.

Stith: Yes, we do. Yes, we do.

Hahn: Well, one final question. You know, what has you optimistic about the year ahead? I mean I think we all sort of made our way through a turbulent year on any number of issues. And I'm sure we all did the best we could to get through it. But as you look ahead to 2021, and hopefully the end of the pandemic, in the not too distant future, what has you optimistic, personally, professionally for our state and for our country?

Stith: I tell you, it goes back to something I said a little earlier. I'm a native North Carolinian. And it's really, you know, the resiliency of the people of this state. That, you know, I'm sure you go anywhere and folks will say we're different, but North Carolinians are different. And while we welcome folks from all across the country, and I think that it says something about our state. People are coming here because we're special, and the potential we have -- whether it's, you know, obviously, I'm going to be a huge champion for the community college system because I think the role that we'll play moving forward will be critical, and even enhanced from what we've done in the past. And that excites me, just the potential that we have to grow as a state, to show what we're able to do as we come out of this pandemic. So while we have some significant challenges in front of us, and this has and will continue to have impact from this pandemic. As you look forward, to me, it is an extremely exciting time not only be here in North Carolina, but to be with the lead agency and lead entity in the state.

Hahn: Well, we certainly appreciate you taking a little time out of what promises to be a busy week, busy month, busy year for you and look forward to being with you and covering you and continuing to sort of see how the story unfolds.

Stith: Well, thank you. I've enjoyed the conversation and look forward to many more.

Hahn: Thank you for tuning in to the latest Awake58 podcast with President Stith. For more community college content, including my preview of the year ahead with suggestions, questions, and tasks that I think Stith and the system office will face, can be found on EdNC.org. That's E D N C dot O R G. We'll be back soon with another podcast. In the meantime, I'll see you out on the road.