

Changing Students' Lives

By Dr. Al Roberts

The end of the year and the holiday season have become inexorably linked with gift-giving. Some gifts are purchased, some are homemade. Some get wrapped in boxes, some entail donating one's time to a cause, and some involve making charitable contributions. In evaluating different kinds of charity, the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon) described eight levels of giving. He ascribed the lowest rank to giving unwillingly. Giving cheerfully was better, as was giving without being asked. He rated giving anonymously higher still, but Maimonides placed the highest honor on giving that enabled the recipient to become self-reliant.

In more contemporary times, Oprah Winfrey made a similar observation, "It's not just about being able to write a check. It's being able to touch somebody's life."

Working in education gives me an opportunity to see these principles in action. On a daily basis, I observe faculty and staff members who give their utmost to touch students' lives. As a result of their influence, I watch students work hard and undergo a transformative process, becoming self-reliant community members and serving as role models for others.

Here at Southside Virginia Community College, we believe that all citizens should be given an opportunity to acquire an education that develops and extends their skills and knowledge. The college's goal is to provide diverse instructional programs ranging from developmental studies to associate's degree curricula, and our offerings cover a wide spectrum of academic, technical/vocational, lifelong education, and workforce development classes.

People who choose to pursue these opportunities often require assistance to cover the costs of education, and SVCC works diligently to give students the support they need. In fact, 94% of beginning students receive financial aid. Much of it originates from federal sources, such as Pell grants. Some comes from state sources. State funds are particularly important to students enrolled in noncredit, workforce development programs. During its 2016 session, the Virginia General Assembly passed a legislative initiative that established the New Economy Workforce Grant Program, a program that can cover up to two-thirds of the cost of courses leading to credentialing in high-demand fields.

These types of federal and state financial aid do not cover the entire cost of education, however. To help students with unmet financial need, the Southside Virginia Community College Foundation administers scholarship programs that help fill the gaps so that deserving students can successfully reach their education goals. During the most recently completed academic year, the Foundation presented awards to more than 250 students. These opportunities were made possible primarily through the generous contributions of local people and businesses who wanted to help today's students succeed and become constructive co-laborers who will join in the task of building a better tomorrow.

Dr. Al Roberts is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the city of Emporia. He can be reached via email at al.roberts@southside.edu.