

TELEGRAM BUSINESS

TOMORROW'S FUTURE



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Children play interactive learning games at the Gateway Technology Center. It is an innovative consortium that pulls together educational leaders from K-12 through the graduate level in ways that boost eastern North Carolina's economic potential.

Gateway Technology Center is a limitless resource

BY LAWRENCE BIVINS
Special to the Telegram

While creating the workforce of tomorrow takes collaboration and partnership, most communities struggle to build workable models that yield measurable results. That hasn't been the case at the Gateway Technology Center, an innovative consortium that pulls together educational leaders from K-12 through the graduate level in ways that boost eastern North Carolina's economic potential.

"It's very practical, it's well-used, and we're glad it's here," says Dewey Clark, president of North Carolina Wesleyan College, whose 200-acre Rocky Mount campus houses Gateway Technology Center.

Opened in 2006, the 16,000-square-foot building itself embodies partnership. The Center is run by a nonprofit group made up of officials from Wesleyan, the City of Rocky Mount, Nash County and the Carolinas Gateway Partnership. "The college leases space there, though most people on campus see it as a seamless part of our operations," Clark says. Wesleyan utilizes the center's technology-equipped classroom and meeting space and counts it

as a resource for students and faculty.

Gateway Technology Center hosts an array of educational programs, the centerpiece being a unique alliance between North Carolina State University and East Carolina University known as "The Collaborative." The arrangement pairs NC State's longtime leadership in extension and engagement with ECU's prowess in distance learning, sparking synergies that bring valuable learning opportunities to a part of North Carolina once underserved by higher education.

"Our programs span cradle to grave," says Sara Hughes of The Collaborative. Graduate-level offerings by The Collaborative typically combine online learning with face-to-face instruction at the center. ECU master's programs in social work and public administration use the center's classrooms, for example. So too does NC State's doctoral program in educational leadership in which the first 19-student cohort will graduate in December.

And while NC State and ECU are the most visible institutions there, Gateway Technology Center is able to host instructional offerings by any of the 16 UNC System campuses. One basic rule



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A presentation at the Gateway Technology Center.

applies: no program offered through The Collaborative can duplicate offerings in Wesleyan's curricula. "We really all work together to provide programming to this region without competing," says Hughes.

The center and The Collaborative give the region's residents a chance to pursue graduate degrees without making the drive to a UNC System campus. The bulk of students come from Edgecombe, Halifax, Nash, Northampton

and Wilson counties, Hughes says. As of June 2017, The Collaborative had helped produce 194 graduates, many of whom might not otherwise have been able to pursue their degree. Another 106 students since recent graduation are currently in the pipeline.

"It would have been a big burden to have had to drive to Raleigh," says Keith Parker, who completed N.C.

See GATEWAY, A7

GATEWAY

Continued from A6

State's Master in School Administration through the center in 2016. Now principal at Tarboro's Martin Millennium Academy, Parker taught American history at Edgecombe County's Southwest High School while participating in the program. His studies occurred through the North East Leadership Academy (NELA), a grant driven program that prepares promising K-12 teachers for careers as principals and school-system officials – provided they remain in eastern North Carolina for at least three years after earning their degree.

NELA — funded by a federal "Race to the Top" grant — addresses shortages of school administrators across eastern North Carolina.

"The old model is no longer working," Parker says of the traditional system wherein educators made piecemeal progress toward management positions. About 100 public and charter school teachers have gone through NELA in the past decade.

Since graduating, Parker has helped shape a "Leadership Challenge" that exposes secondary students to career paths that keep

them in the region. "The point is to give them basic leadership skills that can help encourage conflict resolution, community partnerships and rural economic development," Parker says. Gateway Technology Center hosts many of the program's events.

Youth education is a priority at the center. Through The Collaborative, the Center hosts numerous academic summer camps – coding and veterinary medicine camps, for example, as well as a 4-H STEM camp offered through N.C. State Cooperative Extension.

A robotics camp, held in partnership with Nash Community College, offers middle and high school students a glimpse into what experts predict will be the future of manufacturing.

Youth camps give K-12 students hands-on experience to subjects that can lead to promising careers. Susi Price, a technology and business instructor at James B. Hunt High School in Wilson, has led a video-game design camp at Gateway Technology Center for the past four summers.

At least four former campers are now pursuing computer science

studies in college. In July, she will lead a one-week computer coding camp. "It's one of the fastest growing careers, and there aren't nearly enough people to fill the demand," Price says. Nor will those students interested in coding work need to migrate to large metro areas to find lucrative employment. "We've got many industries in Rocky Mount using automated systems that need someone to program and re-program them," she says. "There are tons of jobs locally."

The Center also houses the Upper Coastal Plain Learning Council, an important consortium of public and private educational providers developing strategic solutions to engrained poverty in the region.

Among the council's latest programs is Hometown Hires, which connects the long-term unemployed with job opportunities by providing education, training and one-on-one coaching.

Hometown Hires will formally launch this fall, says Kathy Lawson, community outreach specialist with the Upper Coastal Plains Learning Council.

Hometown Hires was successfully piloted in Wilmington. "We're only



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Children play interactive video games at the Gateway Technology Center.

the second community in the state to adopt the program," Lawson says. Working with funding partners and employers, Hometown Hires provides participants with everything from professional clothing to transportation to and from job interviews. "We also plan to provide financial-literacy skills to the families of job-seekers," says Lawson. "That's a piece of education that is necessary in addressing generational poverty."

Wesleyan's President

Clark believes the Gateway Technology Center adds great value to his institution's undergraduate experience. "The center serves as a convenient portal. Some of our undergraduate students have attended classes held in the GTC," he says. Now North Carolina's fastest-growing college, Wesleyan will soon launch graduate curricula in business and criminal justice.

And in July, the center will become home to WHIG-TV, a Rocky Mount

television station whose community-oriented programming reaches viewers in 19 North Carolina counties.

The move comes as Wesleyan is creating a communications major, giving students on-campus internship opportunities working with the latest broadcast technologies and production tools. "Imagine the benefit of that to our students," Clark says. "It's one of the things I'm most excited about."