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# WPCC an investment that worked

**EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is the text of the address which Alex Huppe delivered at Western Piedmont Community College's spring commencement exercises last Wednesday evening. Huppe, who is now director of public affairs for Harvard University, is a former instructor and public information officer at WPCC.**

**By ALEX HUPPE**
**For The News Herald**

Thank you, President Richardson, members of the board, and members of this terrific faculty, for inviting me to come back to Western Piedmont and to Burke County to speak with you here today.

And to women and the men of this graduating class, and to their families, I bring a special welcome, for it is your futures that bring us to this assembly today.

This is a humbling moment for me, for I feel I've come back to a place where giants used to roam. Those of us oldtimers who remember the Watergate days will always think of Senator Sam Ervin's wish, upon his retirement from a long and distinguished career, that he come back to his hometown, here in the sunset shadow of Table Rock.

I think of leaders like Dr. Ned Phifer, and newspaper editor Stanley Moore, whose vision of this community included the accommodation of our very best hopes and dreams — our aspirations to become all we are capable of becoming, through education.

Those hopes were put into action by people like Gordon Blank and H.D. Moretz and Richard Greene and Nancy Moore; and in classrooms by people like Ruby Pharr, and Odell Witherspoon and my own mentor, the legendary Roy McGalliard. I cannot begin to name all the names — this honor roll of those who put their shoulders to the wheel to create the quality of this relatively new institution.

But, don't worry — I'm not here to reminisce, especially not to a group raised long after the days of disco. I remember an assistant in my office at Boston University some years ago who expressed real surprise to learn that her button-down-collar boss actually owned a pair of leather pants, but could only laugh when I had to tell her that they were bell-bottoms.

No — I want to assure you that my purpose here today is not to bore you with tales of the "good old days" at Western Piedmont, though in my memories those old days were very good, indeed.

Instead I want to develop an idea about the nature of investment, that includes not just investing for financial security, but investing for a life worth living.

Investment is much on people's minds these days, after nearly seven years of uninterrupted prosperity and low inflation. Great wealth is being created throughout America. It is real wealth, unimpeded by fears of inflation, national debt and broken budgets.

Back in those disco days, with double-digit inflation, high unemployment and a stagnant economy dubbed "stagflation," no one could stop "worrying about tomorrow." It was a time of hoarding stuff like anti-freeze or heating oil, because you just weren't sure you'd be able to afford it or even get it next week.

Gas lines and unemployment lines. Maybe you've seen the pictures. Incomes just couldn't keep pace with the weekly, grinding cost of living increases, and weekly reports of shortages. Japanese automobile imports were clobbering the American automobile industry. In fact, the Japanese and Middle-Eastern economies seemed unstoppable. We were just stuck.

But these are different days, and all that stagflated economy now seems just a bad dream. Now people— especially baby boomers like me, and like your parents, are thinking about that not-too-distant tomorrow when we will live on what we've accumulated — on what we've invested. We can even imagine a day when all of America's needs will be taken care of.

It is surely the sign of a good and prudent people to secure the future. To make sure that the future is provided for. To balance the budget. To begin to make inroads on the national debt. To make sure that the economic future of our children is not blighted by our own short-sightedness.

What is the connection between this new American prosperity and the founding of Western Piedmont — begun in Morganton's City Hall in 1964? I believe that the founding of schools like Western Piedmont Community College were part of the driving power towards economic hope and stability.

The past three and a half decades of Western Piedmont's existence have shown it to be a force in this region's economic recovery and strength, a symbol of a calculated risk — made in far less affluent times — that has paid off handsomely, and is likely to pay off, if properly supported, for as far as we can peer into the future.

America has a history of these kinds of long-term investments. Long before disco days — in 1636, the Governor and the Court of Massachusetts Bay approved the expenditure of 400 pounds for the founding of a college, later to be named Harvard after a benefactor who left his library to the school. It was a huge sum for the time, within just one generation of the Pilgrims' landing.

The founding of Harvard marked the aspirations of the new colony — that this new world could become a place not just of industry, but of

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learning and culture. Those beginnings created a great engine, and few people who visit New England can escape the presence of Harvard, from the companies begun by its research and its graduates, to the influence of its political leaders, to the institution as an employer, as an international center and even as a tourist destination.

Throughout American history some legislature, some act of Congress, some religious organization, some forward thinking community have stretched themselves to create a new college or university, and that educational center has created a kind of economic engine and economic stability that, like the golden goose, keeps on giving back.

If you mapped the communities where, during times of recession, employment remained fairly steady and real estate values remained steady, and you overlaid that map on communities with strong colleges and universities, you would find a near perfect congruence — the map of stable communities would line up with those college and university towns and cities.

Cambridge, Massachusetts. Charlottesville, Virginia. Gainesville, Florida. Iowa City. Palo Alto. Chapel Hill, Durham, Greensboro, High Point, and now, Morganton.

Did the folks who created Western Piedmont plan this? I don't know. But they certainly know that higher education can transform communities, can provide opportunities where none existed before.

One of the social phenomena we have seen, in an aging population in America, is the strong desire to relocate to college towns, where seniors find good hospitals, good services, as well as cultural and recreational activities. The restaurants seem to improve as these fairly wealthy, returning folks settle in. Parks improve. The tax base broadens, and schools can improve.

There is something about education that, intended or not, tends to make a good community better, and a great community even greater. Look at the popular published lists of best cities and towns to live in or to retire to, or the list of best communities to begin your career. There will inevitably be a good college or university there.

Western Piedmont's founders may have been prescient. The early sixties were not altogether easy times in North Carolina. Though unemployment remained fairly low, America endured an economic trough for 106 months, from 1961 to 1969. My first visit here was in 1963, as a 16-year-old heading up towards Yancey County to help build a schoolhouse.

I can remember the quiet poverty of those post desegregation days. A state population that was just inching forward. Poor farms and millwork. But the interstate was going through, and factories were moving South. North Carolina was also blessed by a great governor, Terry Sanford (1961-1965), who understood the transforming power of education.

There was not a great deal of money. There were high aspirations. It was a time of building, and North Carolina is now seventh in the nation for the number of colleges and universities, ranks tenth in terms of enrollment, with one of the lowest state tuitions anywhere in the 50 states. Promises kept.

What Sanford and many of the governors who followed him knew, was something that has been proven true in the new global economy: that wealth doesn't stay idle, and doesn't stay around for long.

Former Secretary of Labor and popular economist Robert Reich, in his 1991 book "Work of the Nations," describes the movement of wealth in a global economy as kind of sticky blob that, moving around the world, sticks at those places where there is a special skill, ability or knowledge.

Thus it is that a computer programmer in Morganton can be working for a German company on an Indonesian project using an American machine with British software. We learned a decade ago that the American automobile industry had become a world industry, and if you look under the hoods of your car, you'll find that to be true. French investments can build American Jeeps, using parts from Belgium and Japan.

How does Burke County compete in this environment? Why has the American economy continued to thrive despite dire predictions of a collapsing world economy?

We can't be so obsessed with higher education as to think it is education alone that makes the entire difference. But surely our system of higher education provides us with an ability to respond quickly to world challenges. The failure of the economy of the former Soviet Union attests to this.

Their economy was based upon a 19th century view of a heavy-manufacturing, industrial world. Productivity could be counted only in the number of tractors, or bushels of wheat, produced. That system cannot value such things as our financial services markets, or communications services or hundreds of new products or services demanded by much of the rest of the world.

That inability to accommodate change helped drive their old system out. (Could you imagine explaining to a Soviet economist how Walmart became the third largest company in America, right after heavy industries of GM and Ford?)

I would propose to you that America's post war gamble on improving higher education, like the transforming G.I. Bill — making education more accessible to more and more of us, is at least part of the reason our economy is in such a healthy state today.

In fact, if your look at the American system of higher education as an industry in itself, you'll find that it is without question the best in the world, even though our secondary system may not be.

It is an American industry where the balance of payments is in our favor. People come from around the world to study at our colleges and universities, and you have evidence of that right here. In a sense, America has been gearing up for a world economy for decades. We knew that the answer to poverty and social issues was more education, more choice in education and better education for more people.

Folks like Dr. Phifer and Stanley Moore saw education as one of the best investments a community can make—one with the biggest payout over the longest terms.

So education has been a good bet, a good investment. It continues to pay off for all of us.

I said I would talk about a theory of investment, and I have been rattling on and on about money, the economy, real estate values and employment. But that's only part of the story. That's the security part — surely the primary reason we invest. But besides piling that money up — and Americans are doing it in record numbers — beyond hoarding our assets for a rainy day and a pleasant retirement, what do our investments mean?

What is it we save for? What is it we hope for? You have invested your time and your money — and in some lucky cases your family's money — in an education. What, besides a good job and a healthy, loving family, do you want out of life?

Are we wrong to think that, in addition to our own security, that we might find a way to end genocide, or teenage violence in our schools, or the problems associated with substance abuse or any of the hundreds of problems that afflict our society? On a personal level, can we hope that our marriages will hold together? that we'll remain interested in each other as individuals or even — and here's a hard one — that we'll find our own company very interesting? What a terrible thing it would be, well into our lives, to find ourselves bored with our own intellect; tired of our own souls; uninterested in the life around us.

I will not suggest to you — ever — that higher education can guarantee you answers to these questions. There are many paths to a satisfying personal life. But I do want to suggest that for many, many people, education does offer a way of staying interested in this world. It is one of the great payouts of this kind of investment. It is no wonder that young people just starting out, and couples of retirement age, seek out college towns. Many of us realize, even if subconsciously, that education holds the promise of change, of renewal, of hope and the ability to reinvent ourselves in this changing world.

I remember, when I started teaching here in 1971, the returning Viet Nam War veterans, and the young housewives whose children had gotten to the age when they could make lunch for themselves. Some of these new college students might have been your parents, or from your family.

When they entered the doors of Western Piedmont, they were as full of fear as they were full of hope. I taught expository writing, and I remember that one of the hardest problems I faced in helping these men and women master writing an essay or a research paper, was to convince them that they had something to say.

The young housewives had an especially hard time in coming up with a thesis sentence about something they thought worthy for college. But get them writing about their children and, whammo — off they went, writing the most interesting stuff. They became poets. The veterans wouldn't write about the war, but they could write about the problems they were having in the V.A. hospital.

Much good came out of those years for them, and for me. Years later, some of them would come back as lawyers, doctors, writers, businesspeople. I think now, as I thought then, that more growth occurred in some of the classrooms on the hill nestled between Burkemont Avenue and I-40, than in the classes in Boston University, Dartmouth or Harvard.

It was an exciting place to be, and I'm told it still is. But I want you to remember something. The college was waiting for these new students because members of this community cared enough to provide that open door.

A group of longsighted people saw here in Morganton in 1964, as they did in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636, the chance for a real investment in what turns out to be the most important and precious asset: our own lives.

Those doors remain open still, providing security for this community, but something even more important: the chance to fulfill our hopes as individuals. And that, graduates, is the best possible kind of investment.

If I could ask you one thing, it would be to keep this idea of investment in the lives of your family, and this community alive. Support it with your time, your efforts, even your votes. Such opportunity doesn't come easily, and it doesn't come cheaply.

And keep coming back for renewal.

Thank you for this opportunity to come back to speak with you here today. The Bible tells us, in Ecclesiastes, that there is a time for every purpose under heaven. May all your purposes be worthy of this place, and your own educations.