

History of the College

Founded in 1964, Isothermal Community College serves Rutherford and Polk counties in the beautiful foothills of western North Carolina. Isothermal, named for the region's steady climate, is a comprehensive, two-year public institution and is a part of the North Carolina Community College System. Isothermal's core purpose is to improve life through learning.

The main campus is on 181 acres in Spindale. The Rutherford campus, perched on the shore of an 11-acre lake, is home to The Foundation Performing Arts and Conference Center, the area's premier venue for the arts and other special events. The college also owns and operates WNCW 88.7, an award-winning public radio station that can be heard in parts of five different states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee and Georgia.

The Polk Center is in Columbus and opened in the fall of 1989. The Polk Center offers GED, massage therapy, equine studies, and driving safety classes on a regular basis as well as a variety of continuing education classes. In August 2013, Isothermal Community College opened the Rutherfordton Learning Center (RLC) to provide administrative and instructional spaces for the Associate Degree Nursing and Practical Nurse Education programs. Continuing Education programs, including Certified Nursing Assistant, were already operating at the RLC. It is located in downtown Rutherfordton, approximately four miles from the main campus and near the regional hospital. In May 2013, the Honorable Walter Dalton, former Lieutenant Governor of North Carolina, was appointed President by the college's Board of Trustees. The preceding president was Dr. Myra Johnson who served as in that capacity for six years. Johnson, served a Isothermal for 23 years most recently as vice president of Academic and Student Affairs. She replaced Dr. Willard L. Lewis, III, who retired from the post in 2007 after 21 years at the college. During Johnson's presidency, the college acquired approximately 39 acres of property, contiguous to its existing borders. Most of this property was purchased by the Isothermal Community College Foundation and donated to the college, while one parcel was given to the college by the Rutherford County Board of Commissioners.

In January 2008, the doors were opened on the new Willard L. Lewis, III, Lifelong Learning Center. The two-story building of approximately 24,000 square feet houses classrooms, office space, high-tech distance learning facilities and the Rutherford Early College High School. The center will ultimately host many of the collaborative efforts for higher learning Isothermal has with Western Carolina, Gardner-Webb and Appalachian State universities. Recently, the College partnered with Polk County Schools to support the Polk County Early College.

Interest in a community college for Rutherford and Polk counties began even before a statewide community college system was established. In 1963, the General Assembly passed Chapter 115A, General Statutes of North Carolina, establishing the Department of Community Colleges, and shortly thereafter the Rutherford County Commissioners appointed a committee to study and promote plans for a community college in the county. The preliminary report, submitted in March 1964, recommended that the proposed college serve Rutherford and Polk counties, that a site south of Spindale be chosen, and that the college be financed by a bond issue and a special tax levy. On Sept. 5, 1964, Rutherford County citizens voted by a margin of more than 16 to 1 in favor of a \$500,000 bond issue for construction of the college, to be matched by

state funds, and a property tax increase to pay the county's portion of the operating costs. The college was chartered on Oct. 1, 1964, by the State Board of Education. The first meeting of the Board of Trustees was held on Nov. 17, and on Nov. 23 the Board approved the name "Isothermal Community College." Fred J. Eason was chosen by the Board as the College's first president on Dec. 22. On July 1, 1965, the Industrial Education Center, which had been operating since 1962 as an extension of Gaston Technical Institute, became the vocational and technical division of Isothermal Community College. The College thus began operation with 66 students, some of whom received the first diplomas issued by Isothermal in exercises that August. August 1965 also marked the culmination of a fundraising drive by Rutherford and Polk citizens and businesses for the purchase of land for the Rutherford campus.

Until the new campus was ready, the vocational-technical, college transfer (begun in Sept. 1966) and adult education divisions were scattered in a number of temporary locations in Avondale, Spindale and Caroleen. College transfer and vocational-technical education each had about 100 students. The adult education program was boosted by the creation of the High School Diploma program in May 1967. That same year, Isothermal's Polk County program began with continuing education courses in Tryon. The first three buildings on the Rutherford campus (Administration, Library and Continuing Education) opened on April 8, 1968, and the College's first full-fledged graduation exercises were held on Aug. 30. The lake and initial landscaping of the campus were completed by April 27, 1969, when the College's charter was presented. By that time, 554 full-time students were enrolled. On Jan. 11, 1970, the College was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Expansion continued with the opening of a new Occupational Education Building in 1972. A satellite program for Polk County was approved in September 1974, and in November 1974 Rutherford County voters passed a \$1.8 million bond issue for additional construction on the Rutherford campus. This enabled construction of a new vocational building with electronics facilities which opened in September 1978, and the student center/ physical education building which opened in the spring of 1979. Both buildings were dedicated on October 21, 1979. President Eason retired effective June 30, 1978, and the Board of Trustees selected Dr. Ben E. Fountain, Jr. as his successor. Dr. Dillard L. Morrow served as acting president until Dr. Fountain could assume his duties in September.

With help from local business and industry, the Individualized Instruction Center opened in the fall of 1979, and the marble marker at the entrance to the campus was completed in November 1979. Generous support was also evident in the creation of the Robert W. Eaves Outstanding Teacher Award, established in 1982 by the widow of the noted Rutherford County educator. The Polk County Campus also progressed, with the initiation of an independent study program and college transfer courses in 1976, and attainment of classroom space in the old Jervey-Palmer Building in Tryon. A permanent site for the campus became available in October 1982 when the Polk County Commissioners granted the college 10 1/2 acres near St. Luke's Hospital. This new site was dedicated on July 25, 1983. Construction of the new facility was completed in the fall of 1989.

Dr. Willard L. Lewis, III was appointed President on June 9, 1986 following the retirement of Dr. Fountain (1985) and the interim service of Dr. G. Herman Porter. Under the leadership of Dr. Lewis, further expansion of the Rutherford campus included the completion of the High Tech Center (1988) which housed drafting, broadcasting,

advertising/graphic design and electronics engineering. A second major building program resulted in The Foundation Performing Arts and Conference Center. This 61,216 square-foot facility opened in November of 1999 with a performance by the North Carolina Symphony Orchestra.

Beginning in the 1990's and continuing to date, in conjunction with a reexamination of mission and philosophy, the college has pursued a transformation in culture from the teaching paradigm to the learning paradigm. In seeking ways to improve learning, the college dedicates resources in support of cooperative learning in the classroom as part of an ongoing commitment to the development of a learning centered environment.

Policy Number: 102-01-00

Adopted: April 1965

Amended: May 1984; November 1986; November 1989; July 1993; February 10, 2004; August 2005; February 16, 2010; November 1, 2014

[Download a PDF of this policy](#)