

**University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Chancellor Nomination Statement
by UNC System President Peter Hans
August 9, 2024**

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has been an extraordinary institution for a very long time.

What started in the late 1700s as a revolutionary idea — a state-supported university to prepare young citizens for life in a young democracy — has grown into a modern powerhouse of research, scholarship, service and civic uplift, a vibrant and sprawling institution that touches every aspect of North Carolina’s culture, economy, and public life.

UNC Chapel Hill is a magnet for talent and a center for great teaching, home to more than 20,000 undergraduates and nearly 12,000 graduate students.

It is one of the largest and most productive research institutions in the world, earning more than \$1.2 billion in research funding each year.

It is an enormous medical center, serving patients and training the next generation of health care providers in every region of our state.

It is a legendary sports brand, drawing legions of devoted fans in everything from basketball to field hockey.

It’s an economic engine for the whole state, attracting talent, spinning off companies, and driving investments in just about every sector you can imagine.

And it is the state’s toolbox in times of need, ever ready to tackle the toughest issues facing our policymakers and our people.

Carolina is the university we love, and the university we fight over.

The place that commands attention for its accomplishments and even more attention for its controversies.

An institution with a local mission and global reach, a place committed to both serving North Carolina and challenging it.

To put it plainly, Carolina is a lot to handle.

You could spend a lifetime at this institution and not discover all the different lines of work, all the different areas of research, all the different interests and ideas competing for a place within this vast enterprise.

Leadership here is not for the faint of heart.

Carolina will always be the first public university in the nation, blessed with the magic of the Well, the bell, and the old stone walls.

Its long history, both rich and troubled, will always be part of what makes this place special.

It will always be one of the most beautiful, iconic, and inviting campuses in all of higher education.

The responsibility of our next chancellor isn't simply to preserve those strengths, but to decide what comes next for this brilliant and storied university.

No institution can afford to rest on its laurels, and my priority throughout this search has been to find an energetic, clear-eyed leader who can shape Carolina for the better.

The search advisory committee heard from truly excellent candidates who put forward compelling visions for the university.

As you would expect from an institution of Carolina's caliber, we had interest from accomplished academic leaders, prize-winning researchers, and national figures who admire North Carolina's broad, bipartisan support for higher education.

It should give every Tar Heel a great sense of pride to know the respect that this institution holds and the level of talent it attracts.

I want to thank the members of the search advisory committee, and especially our chair, Dr. Cristy Page, for giving this work the care and commitment it deserved.

I want to thank the thousands of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and devoted Tar Heels who offered comments and attended forums.

Their valuable feedback formed the basis of the leadership statement used to advertise for candidates in the national search.

No one doubts that this institution is among the strongest anywhere around, backed by generations of steadfast public support.

As the search committee members repeatedly discussed during our deliberations, Carolina can be and should be the very best public university in the country.

And I believe we need a leader who shares that vision and can help us fully realize it.

Someone with the right combination of reverence for this university's history and restless aspiration for its next chapter.

Someone who understands that Carolina is many things to many different people, and that a public university must welcome and support many different interests and ideas.

Someone who isn't troubled by the often-intense debate about this university's future, someone who understands public scrutiny as a sign of devotion.

Someone who isn't afraid to make hard decisions, defend this institution's core values, and own the responsibilities of public leadership.

Someone who appreciates that Carolina's excellence is not a birthright, but an accomplishment to be earned each and every day.

Every institution in the UNC System is distinctive, and every era is unique in the challenges and possibilities it presents.

As a result, every chancellor search is different.

In this one, I believe we have found the right leader for this moment in Carolina's history.

Because the questions facing public higher education are wide-ranging, enormously complex, and likely to become magnified in the years ahead.

We must maintain public confidence at a time of deepening skepticism and rising polarization.

We must make far-reaching decisions about the best way to support core disciplines while exploring emerging fields of knowledge.

We must welcome more talent as North Carolina continues to grow and change and prosper.

And we must ensure that this 230-year-old institution remains the best place in the world for smart and driven people to expand the boundaries of knowledge and contribute to the common good.

I am convinced those questions are best addressed right now by a set of fresh eyes — by someone with experiences and expertise that offer a wide perspective on the challenges and opportunities ahead.

And that is why I'm proud to nominate Lee Roberts as the chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

He offers a broad understanding of Carolina's role and potential as a Tar Heel by choice, someone who didn't grow up here but fell in love with the place and its possibilities.

He shares that backstory with about half the adults in this state, people who were drawn to North Carolina by the sense of a state on the move, a place where talent and ambition are welcomed and rewarded, a culture that is striking the right balance between tradition and innovation.

That's the spirit I want for my alma mater in Chapel Hill, and that's exactly what I believe Lee Roberts brings to the job.

During his time as interim chancellor, Roberts has shown a willingness to listen, to learn, to approach difficult moments with humility.

I have a deep respect for those who invite dissenting opinions and make a point of engaging with thoughtful critics, and Roberts has demonstrated that instinct time and again.

Frequently for the past eight months, I've heard from people surprised to get an unprompted email, phone call, or note from Interim Chancellor Roberts, asking them to meet and share their ideas.

When a student group held a teach-in to vent strident criticism of the university's leadership, Lee Roberts didn't ignore them or issue a bland statement.

He actually showed up to listen, to engage, to participate in the kind of civil discussion that this community deserves.

When campus protests were all over the national news, and Roberts was invited to air his views on cable TV or score points in partisan news outlets, he said no.

Instead, he sat for a thoughtful interview with Chapel Hill's local radio station, reached out to town leaders, and spent hours meeting with concerned faculty and students.

He kept his focus where it needed to be — not on himself but on the university and its mission.

When I appointed Roberts as interim chancellor, I said that Carolina would benefit from calm, steady, and focused leadership.

And through this period of turmoil for higher education, it has.

He has been willing to make tough decisions under immense pressure, and to stand behind the core principles of this place even when it's difficult.

He has consistently defended the academic freedom of faculty, the rights of students, and the interest of the institution in meeting its educational mission.

As you all know quite well, chancellors don't get to make easy calls.

Their role is to weigh tradeoffs, accept intensive scrutiny, and find a way to earn trust and respect while rarely giving any constituency all that it wants.

Roberts has shown a patient understanding that Carolina does not belong to any one faction or any one cause but to the entire state, with a duty to welcome and serve people of every background and belief.

That responsibility is especially important as our public universities navigate this era of passionate intensity in public life and deep divisions in our society and politics.

Ask anyone who has known the Roberts family, and they'll attest to an open-minded eagerness to have different views around the table and friendships that transcend all manner of disagreements.

He will need that mindset and those strong relationships in the years ahead.

I share with Lee Roberts a strong appreciation for Carolina's excellence — and a conviction that it has room to grow and improve.

UNC is a world-class place to learn and study, but it does not always deliver a world-class experience to students trying to register for classes; to staff trying to get through red tape; to department heads trying to hire; to faculty trying to spend grant money.

The university has extensive needs in terms of physical infrastructure, technology investment, and modern business practices.

Its next leader will need to deliver on the promise of operational excellence that matches Carolina's academic prowess.

During a period of rapid growth for North Carolina, UNC-Chapel Hill has moved at a slower pace.

I believe it's time for Carolina to welcome more talent from across our state and across our country, and Roberts brings a pragmatic understanding of what it will take to expand this university's service to a vibrant state.

"The future belongs to North Carolina," he likes to say, and North Carolina's flagship university must be ready for it.

Roberts is also thinking ambitiously about how to build on Carolina's core strengths in fields crucial to our economy and to the health and wellbeing of our people.

When I look back at the history of this university, its moments of greatest triumph have come from an energetic embrace of new fields and emerging societal needs.

Lee Roberts knows how to maintain the humanistic core of a Carolina education while confidently exploring the frontiers of science and technology that are doing so much to shape our world, and perhaps cross-pollinating those two areas of strength.

A chancellorship in the UNC System is a public trust, a promise to protect all that is good and valuable in our universities while ensuring that they change and improve to serve a rising generation of North Carolinians.

Lee Roberts understands that responsibility and he appreciates the productive tension of preserving an institution and pushing it forward at the same time.

I've half-joked with the Carolina faithful about what I call his "youthful indiscretion" as a Blue Devil, but I am grateful for his road-to-Damascus conversion from the much darker shade of blue.

We will now bring him fully into the light...

As president of the UNC System and as a proud graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill, I make this nomination with great expectation as I share Lee Roberts' energy and ambition for this place that we all love.