

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
April 10, 2025

Regular listeners of these last several years of Board remarks — and that includes many patient souls in this room — will recognize consistent themes.

First, that I believe higher education has been and remains an enormous source of strength for our state and our nation. Second, that public confidence in higher education nationally has fallen, reflecting a broad trend of weakening trust in institutions of all kinds. And finally, that we owe our students, our citizens, and future generations of North Carolinians our best and most urgent effort to fortify these critical engines of knowledge, mobility, and culture.

In the long history of American public life, periods of ease and harmony are the exception, not the rule. We need universities built for all seasons, ready to thrive and play their part in the grand American experiment.

There are two crucial steps for public institutions to earn and maintain public trust. The first is to stay focused on our core mission — to remember that job we’ve been asked to do and stay committed to it. And the second is to execute well on that educational mission. That combination of focus and performance is what inspires confidence among the people we serve.

The University of North Carolina System has done well when it comes to focus. This Board created and maintained one of the most disciplined strategic plans in all of higher education, a short and sharp document that distills our priorities of affordability, student success, and on-time graduation. We set realistic goals and put performance incentives in place, and as a result, we are seeing improvement on the things that matter most to our students and our state.

We’ve also taken steps to minimize distractions in a fraught era. Our early adoption of institutional neutrality has allowed campus leaders to focus on their educational roles instead of constantly chasing the news cycle. Our consistent advocacy for free speech and academic freedom has helped us protect open inquiry against a culture of censorship. And our policy on nondiscrimination and equal opportunity reinforced our mandate to serve all North Carolinians, regardless of their backgrounds or beliefs.

On every one of those fronts, we are stronger and better prepared than we were a few years ago, and I commend this Board for its foresight and commitment. I’m proud to say that the UNC System was ahead of the curve on these crucial questions that so many other universities are now struggling with.

That’s the focus side of the equation. When it comes to day-to-day execution — the capacity of our institutions to deliver the services they promise, to efficiently achieve the goals we’ve set out — there, I think we have some work to do.

For all the traditional and social media focus on politics, on the Ivy League, on controversies near and far that we may or may not remember next week — and for all of the very real concern about the strategic

challenges facing higher education — the single most common complaint I hear from faculty, staff, and students about the university is that it's just painfully hard to get things done.

I'm thinking of the talent we've missed because it takes many months to make a hire. I'm thinking of how many North Carolina businesses are reluctant to work with the university because whole fiscal quarters come and go before they get paid. I'm thinking of the brilliant scholars who were drawn to academic life for the chance to research and discover and have found instead that their time is eaten away with paperwork and compliance. And as we stare down a future of fewer traditional-age students, I am thinking of all the promising young people we've discouraged with difficult processes to fully access our public universities.

Simply put, I don't believe we can thrive in the decades to come if we don't take this moment to rethink and reinvigorate the way we do business. Our mission is timeless, and that's a wonderful thing. But too often, our processes and procedures also feel timeless, and not in a healthy way.

Last year on a visit to Italy I learned about the "lasagna analogy" in archaeology which refers to the idea that archaeological sites, like a lasagna, are composed of different periods, cultures, and events, each representing layers of history. By carefully digging, they uncover artifacts, materials, and cultural practices. This can also apply to university campuses where layers of "lasagna" are often laid one on top of the other to maneuver around some person or previous idea but only leads to more complexity.

Many commentators have lamented "the growing bureaucratization of American life." Health care is just one example of this macrotrend: expensive, confusing, and difficult to navigate without help. And it's not only that growing bureaucracies cost a lot of money. They also sap initiative, creativity, and drive with too many layers and too much duplication. They make it harder for American institutions like the university to accomplish the grand designs we expect of them — which, in turn, undermines confidence.

As a result, I will be directing a reduction in administrative costs at those institutions where spending growth is outpacing state salary adjustments and increases or declines in student credit hours. Also, I'm asking my team and the chancellors to look at federal, state, and System rules that unduly burden the university without corresponding benefits so we can seek a modicum of additional relief.

The goal of this effort is to rebalance and calibrate the university back toward its core missions of teaching, research, and service — and to remove accompanying administrative burdens that make it hard for us to thrive. Our public universities should be vibrant, creative places to work, teach, and discover. We want them to be the kind of dynamic places that reward innovation. That requires "tending the garden" in any large, collaborative, and subsidized organization now and then.

If there are policies that need changing, let's change them. If there are regulations that need reform, let's reform them. If there are compliance regimes that have outlived their usefulness, let's retire them. Federal requirements alone are estimated to add 10 percent to the overall cost of higher education. And let's be mindful of how System-level directives add to this load as well.

Our campus leaders have done a good job these last few years of keeping costs down, which is one reason we've been able to keep tuition flat for nine years in a row while continuing to deliver a high-

quality education. That's why I'm not looking at this effort as a way to cut, but a way to refocus. My intention is that the money saved through administrative reductions be redirected towards the performance goals the Board has clearly identified for us to achieve.

Bureaucracy and accountability mechanisms are absolutely necessary to manage the essential functions of any large organization. But too much slows our response to change and can "gum up the works." The pace of change is accelerating, not slowing, thanks to powerful waves in the economy, demography, technology, and society, whether we like or not. The university must operate more efficiently. Focus on the mission and execute on the mission. Avoid overreaching the mission. And simplify, simplify, simplify from the user experience level. Ironically, lower administrative spending may help us do just that.