

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
July 24, 2024

One of the most important things this board has done over the past decade is establish a set of goals for the UNC System that have stood the test of time. We are now in the 7th year of operating under a concise, intensely focused strategic plan that prizes affordability, cost efficiency, economic impact, and student success. It has clear metrics for reducing student debt, expanding access for underserved students, growing research productivity, and raising graduation rates.

Year after year, we've been able to point to real, tangible improvement in the core mission of our public universities. We've been able to show, concretely, that our focus on the fundamentals has paid off for students and taxpayers.

That's one of the reasons North Carolina remains a positive outlier in terms of public investment and public confidence toward its universities. Nationally, we've seen a sharp decline in trust toward higher education. There's a belief that many universities have drifted from their core mission delivering a sound education at a reasonable cost.

In North Carolina, we've done it differently. The decision to tie chancellor compensation, my compensation, and increasingly our entire public funding structure to measurable performance has done exactly what it was designed to do — keep us focused and make our institutions better at their core mission. The ships are all sailing in the same direction, as I like to say.

North Carolina's public universities are more affordable today than they were eight years ago; student debt among our graduates is lower today than it was eight years ago; our research enterprise is vastly more productive today than it was eight years ago; our efficiency in delivering degrees is better than it was eight years ago. These are not small accomplishments, and I want to congratulate the faculty, staff, and university leadership who have put tremendous effort into making it happen.

We register these things as percentage points of year-over-year improvement, as upward slopes on a line graph. But every one of those improving metrics represents thousands more students who earned a degree on time, or left school with manageable debt and great career prospects. Every improvement in efficiency and affordability represents thousands more working families who can look at our public universities and think, "Yes — that's a real opportunity for us." That's where I believe public confidence is won — in the relentless drive to keep our promise of an affordable, valuable education.

In that spirit, I want to focus our attention today on the critical metric of four-year graduation rates. We have a few encouraging stories to tell on that front. Over the past seven years of the system's strategic plan we've seen Elizabeth City's four-year graduation rate rise 33 percent, A&T's 29 percent, and UNC Charlotte's 32 percent. They've all coupled additional supports with higher expectations for student progress in a timely fashion, and that work has paid off for students.

But we've also seen clear warning signs. Over the same period, Fayetteville State's four-year graduation rate fell 11 percent and UNC Asheville's dropped 10 percent. Several of our universities remain stuck with their four- and even six-year graduation rates below where they need to be.

The pandemic certainly played a role. We knew that school shutdowns and the disruption for middle and high school students would create long-range challenges, affecting the academic readiness of the students we serve. And we see lots of evidence for that in the data.

But the different outcomes at different institutions suggest there's a great deal we can do to improve the odds for students. One of the great things about having a diverse and well-connected system is that we can learn from each other. There are institutions that have made great progress in eliminating needless barriers to graduation, targeting outreach and support to the students who need it most, and investing in the kind of mentoring, teaching, and social support that allows students to thrive.

We need to apply those lessons as we recommit to student success. Every student we admit deserves high expectations and the support to meet them. For access and opportunity to be meaningful, every student should have the resources and encouragement they need to earn their success. It is important to note that the newer chancellors at both Fayetteville State and UNC Asheville have now linked student and financial aid with achieving credit milestones. Those best practices will pay off.

I have said many times before that our public universities must maintain a public-interest standard when it comes to serving students. Families should be able to trust that if we offer admission, we're also promising every reasonable opportunity to succeed in a timely fashion. Yes, graduating in four years can be a challenge particularly for working students, but the uneven completion rates across the System and stubborn gaps between student groups are troubling. Time is money on the path to graduation, and our students pay a literal price when that path is long or incomplete.

If fairness and equal opportunity mean anything, they must include an earnest focus on raising the odds of success for the students likely to benefit most from higher education. They must mean being genuinely prepared to serve all of those we admit. They must mean high expectations for every university and for every student. Indeed, the very name of our strategic plan is "Higher Expectations." Let's hold to them.