

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
Sept. 12, 2024

Enrollment is up across the UNC System this fall. We are welcoming more students, at lower cost, at all of our public institutions. Systemwide, enrollment increased roughly 2.2% this year, giving us an overall boost of 3.5% since 2022. We now enroll nearly 248,000 students across the state — a record.

Every one of our campuses saw growth over the last year, and all but two have grown since 2022. There are now more than 8,000 additional students pursuing a life-changing opportunity across our state than there were two years ago, and we should be enormously proud of that. You can see that we've had especially strong growth at our larger institutions and most of our HBCUs. And there's been an encouraging reversal at UNC Greensboro and UNC Asheville, two institutions that saw declining enrollment in recent years but have now stabilized with an eye on the future.

Those gains come in the face of strong headwinds. It was in September 2022 that I warned this Board of the challenges before us, with a looming decline in the number of college-age high school graduates compounded by a growing national skepticism about the value of college. Most of you will remember the lengthy presentation I made to the board with multiple charts. We have been preparing for a world of fewer young people, and with fewer of those young people who see college as the surest route to success and economic security.

Those preparations are yielding results. Two years ago, I said that facing reality would mean sharpening our value proposition and reshaping our mission to match the state we're here to serve. Together, we laid out a series of eight key steps to keep public higher education affordable; keep public confidence in our work; and keep our promises to the students and families who trust us with their future.

- 1.) We've kept tuition for North Carolina students flat for eight years running. That matters not just for the math of any individual family, but for the message it sends to all families. North Carolina's public universities belong to everyone and are open to everyone.
- 2.) We delivered on the pledge to simplify financial aid, creating a state scholarship program that's easy to understand and reassuring to working families. The NEXT NC Scholarship arrived at an especially important moment as colleges everywhere deal with the botched reform of federal financial aid, which created enormous uncertainty for families this year.
- 3.) We've patiently been building an online platform to reach adult learners and re-engage students who left higher education without a degree. Project Kitty Hawk remains a crucial piece of our strategy to reach more North Carolinians who can benefit from what our universities have to offer, and to reconnect with students who have made progress toward a degree but left without finishing. That reenrollment effort has brought more than 2,800 students back to our universities, and it made a meaningful impact on this year's enrollment gains.
- 4.) We opened the door to more out-of-state students in places where we had capacity and demand, especially our historically black universities, and we've done it while also adding more

North Carolinians. That has brought much-needed talent to our state and much-needed investment to our institutions.

- 5.) We've done what we promised on making the transfer process easier and more appealing, encouraging ambitious students across the state to continue their education in the UNC System. We delivered on the long-overdue reform of common course numbering, so that students can more easily map their future at a UNC System school. We recently created comprehensive transfer guides so students, parents, and counselors can see the upshot of transferring from the community college system to the UNC System. That has not been glamorous work, but it will pay off for our students, more than one-third of whom will transfer at some point in their lives.
- 6.) We've continued to push for on-time graduation, incentivizing campuses to boost average credit hours and keep students moving toward a diploma. Nothing matters more for delivering on our value proposition than ensuring successful graduation with preparation for life after school, and all of our campus leaders will stay closely focused on that priority.
- 7.) We've publicized a comprehensive, independent study of our value to students and families, demonstrating that the vast majority of our programs deliver a clear financial payoff for students and being candid about the areas where we need to improve. Holding ourselves to a public-interest standard — ensuring that students leave our public institutions with better prospects — is crucial for maintaining public trust.
- 8.) And finally, we've sent an important message that our public institutions are not the exclusive home of any one party, faction, or viewpoint, but genuinely do belong to all North Carolinians. Protecting free speech and academic freedom; welcoming diversity of background and belief; standing up for equality of opportunity — these things matter for earning public trust over time in a big, vibrant, and politically contentious state and nation.

These are not one-off initiatives. They add up to a real, long-term strategy to meet our core mission in a changing world. Providing affordable, meaningful opportunity to the people of North Carolina when and where they need it — that's the business we're in, and that's the overarching focus of our efforts.

And we're adding new ideas like NC College Connect, a partnership with DPI, to enable qualified high school students to bypass the traditional application process into six UNC System universities, and UNC-Chapel Hill's Choose NC Program which utilizes the common app opt-in for potential applicants to other universities in the system.

None of us are taking a victory lap after one year's positive enrollment numbers. The demographic cliff approaching is real and quite measurable so the head winds will remain strong. And we don't measure the health of our public universities in a single snapshot, but over decades. But I am encouraged that we've been clear-eyed about our challenges, strategic about where we're investing, and executing on the priorities we identified years ago.

It speaks well of this Board and our campus leaders that through some tumultuous times in higher education, we've kept our focus where it needs to be — effectively serving the students and families of this state and strengthening our universities for the era ahead.