

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
September 14, 2023

Low tuition is at the heart of our compact with the citizens of North Carolina. We can only be the University of the People if we offer an education the people of this state can afford.

For that reason, I am recommending to this Board that we keep in-state tuition for undergraduates unchanged for an eighth consecutive year. In real dollars, that means tuition at our public universities is lower today — and will be lower next year — than it was at the end of the Obama administration. At our four NC Promise schools, it's dramatically lower today than it was eight years ago. There's not a single other state in the country that can claim a similar achievement, and I would like to see us extend this remarkable run to a full decade.

Continuing to hold the line on tuition sends an unmistakable signal to students and families across North Carolina that our public universities are open and available to all. It's the most important message we can share, and the most important step we can take to maintain public support for higher education.

Frustration about ever-rising college costs, which became so entrenched over the past two generations, has done real damage to the students we need to reach in order to fulfill our mission. Poor and working-class families too often get the message that college is out of reach, that college debt is crushing, that degrees don't pay off. We need to say loudly and clearly that in North Carolina, that simply isn't true.

Not only are we holding the line on college costs; we've made huge progress on student debt. Far fewer of our students are borrowing to attend college, and those that do are borrowing less today than they did three years ago.

We need families across our state to hear that good news. There is a lot of concern nationwide about falling confidence in colleges and universities. It's been well-documented in survey after survey that Americans are more skeptical about the value of a college degree, and that uncertainty is affecting the decisions families make.

Now, I have said loudly and often that college cannot be — and should not be — the only path to success. We need good jobs and high-quality training programs that don't require a degree, at least not immediately, and we need to do far more to help working adults find new opportunities as the economy shifts and their aspirations change. America is a big and dynamic country, much too big for a single path to a good life.

At the same time, we know from decades and decades of experience that a college education is an enormously valuable thing — not just economically, but in all the ways we can measure. Low tuition has always been the North Carolina way, and it has been a remarkable driver of our state's growth and vitality. It is a constitutional commitment and a moral obligation.

North Carolina's evolution from a mostly poor, mostly struggling state to a powerhouse of innovation ran through our classrooms and our research laboratories. We didn't become a global magnet for investment, for invention, for people seeking a better quality of life by accident. We did it by welcoming talent from all walks of life, by ensuring broad access to a great education.

That focus on affordability continues to pay off.

At a time when so many institutions nationally are struggling to recruit students, our university system is growing. North Carolina's public universities are proving every day that they deliver enormous value for students and for taxpayers. That matters for the individual students we serve, and it matters for the long-term health of our state.

I want to thank this Board for its sustained focus on affordability, and I want to acknowledge the disciplined effort that our chancellors and their teams. Keeping tuition low means keeping actual costs in check, and that requires some tough decisions on our campuses. Over the last few years, we've worked closely with all of our institutions to create comprehensive, all-funds budgets that allow for much more detailed decision-making about how to allocate resources and ensure that we're operating efficiently.

We've seen vast improvements in the way we plan and execute capital projects and handle ongoing maintenance. We've set clear performance goals that hold everyone accountable for delivering stronger graduation rates and lower debt.

That approach has proven highly effective, and it has earned us great confidence from our lawmakers. Low tuition is our half of the University's compact with North Carolina; strong public support for higher education is the other. We've done our part, and the taxpayers of North Carolina and their elected leaders have generously done theirs.

There have always been, and will always be, intense political battles about higher education. What gets taught, who gets hired, whether 9:00pm on a weeknight is too late to start a basketball game. We fight about education because it matters, because people of goodwill have competing ideas for how best to meet our mission.

What sets North Carolina apart is not the intensity of our political battles, but the consistency of our political support for higher education. We must never, ever take that for granted. I certainly don't, and I know this Board doesn't.



My thanks for your continued leadership. None of this would be possible without this Board's close focus on cost and affordability, and without the great work of so many across the System who understand that low tuition is central to our mission.