



UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
May 29, 2024

The promise of public higher education lies in its power to take students from all backgrounds and change their lives for the better. No university in our state fulfills this promise better than Winston-Salem State, North Carolina's No. 1 institution for promoting economic mobility. Day in and day out, the faculty, staff, and leadership of WSSU fulfill the vision that founded this place in 1892.

For more than 130 years, the Rams have been part of the civic fabric of Winston-Salem and beyond, growing alongside our state's HBCUs and becoming a cherished part of the UNC System. With the right mix of pragmatism and inspiration, WSSU built programs to serve the ambitions of its students, and like the city it calls home, proved to be adaptable and resilient in a rapidly changing state.

For the past year, the university has benefited from the thoughtful leadership of Interim Chancellor Anthony Graham. The provost stepped in during a period of reflection for Winston-Salem State. He brought his compassion and analytical skills during a transition when we needed him most. I hope you'll join me in thanking Dr. Graham for all he's done and will continue to do in the UNC System.

And now we turn our attention to the selection of a permanent chancellor with similar commitment and staying power, with energy and enthusiasm, someone to see Winston-Salem State through a moment of great challenge and great promise in public higher education.

Today, it's my honor to nominate someone who has called the Triad home from her earliest days; someone who has demonstrated confident leadership at the highest levels of universities in three states; someone who has devoted her life and talent to educational access and student success; someone we're proud to welcome back to Winston-Salem with open arms and great expectations.

It is my honor to nominate Bonita J. Brown as the next chancellor of Winston-Salem State University.

For more than two decades, she has melded the devotion of an advocate and the sharp thinking of an attorney. She's a double graduate of Wake Forest University. And from Livingstone College to Winston-Salem State, to the UNC School of the Arts, to the University of North Texas, to UNC Greensboro and to Northern Kentucky University, she has served in senior roles at campuses that do the vital and difficult work of providing broad access to higher education, welcoming all students, and ensuring they have the resources and support to succeed.

She understands the intricate ways that policies and practices impact the student experience, and how important it is that leaders stay focused on the core goals of the university. Finding ways to manage the day-to-day operations of a university without losing sight of the long-range mission is an important challenge for any chancellor, and Ms. Brown has forged that balance throughout her career.

Working in public university systems, she's fluent in the language of policymakers and public officials, making her a capable translator between academic culture and the world of public policy. She

understands how to balance campus priorities and state needs, how to advocate for one institution while remaining mindful of its role within a broader ecosystem.

Those are skills and perspectives she carried with her from campus life to Washington, where she served in high-level positions with The Education Trust and Achieving the Dream. Both of those national nonprofits help access-oriented institutions, sharing best practices and disseminating vital research on student success. Ms. Brown has seen how institutional policies can bolster students on the path to graduation and how institutional roadblocks can prove devastating to students' aspirations.

Her commitment to putting students first has been on display in her most recent roles with Northern Kentucky University, where she helped boost student retention and on-time graduation to new heights. And now it's time to bring those talents back home where her family still lives!

Bonita Brown is, in the truest sense, a daughter of Winston-Salem State. She has spoken often about growing up on this campus, where her parents met as students and where her mother studied to become an educator. Ms. Brown was being carried to WSSU classrooms from the time she was an infant, offering an early experience in the importance of social mobility and a supportive college atmosphere.

Having a teacher as a mother also meant a childhood steeped in the value of education. "When your mother is a teacher, you have to learn. I was reading by the time I was 3 and always at the top of my classes," as Ms. Brown says. "It wasn't really an option." She brought those same high expectations, that same confidence in the capacity of students to learn and thrive to every role she's held.

She has held leadership positions with broad responsibilities for so many aspects of an institution — chief of staff, chief strategy officer, general counsel, and interim president. These are all areas that demand a wide array of insight and expertise, an ability to balance competing needs and interests across the complex range of university functions, a willingness to bridge between disciplines and organizational cultures. That ability to keep the university's core mission at the forefront, even while dealing with two dozen different issues in each workday — is a crucial quality in effective chancellors.

Her leadership experiences in higher education have prepared her well. She developed and led the implementation of long-range strategic plans which chart clear courses for the future. She balanced budgets and cleared deficits – never an easy task. She championed student success and set institutional records for graduation and retention rates and time-to-degree completion. She expanded online degree programs reaching thousands of adult learners. She revamped enrollment strategies and developed new marketing strategies to attract more students. She built collaborative relationships with faculty and staff and broke down barriers to strengthening research productivity. She actively engaged in, and was successful at, fundraising.

As interim president at Northern Kentucky University, she stepped into a challenging moment of financial stress for the university, offering calm, steady leadership that helped put the institution on sound footing. That meant presenting hard truths to anxious constituents, helping rally the campus around a shared challenge instead of fracturing into competing interest groups. Those shocks can be a real crucible for institutions and their leaders, and as interim president, she ensured that NKU emerged stronger and better prepared for a changing higher education landscape.

We know that storied institutions like Winston-Salem State are adapting to shifts in student demographics, academic interests, and demand for greater guidance and support. This is a marvelous institution with deep strengths, and capitalizing on them will require a leader with a clear-eyed understanding of strategy and a deep appreciation for the culture and history that makes this place so special. It also requires a leader with passion, enthusiasm, and a strong work ethic. Ms. Brown has it all, and I am so delighted that she has agreed to come back home and put her talents to work.

There is nothing more gratifying to me, as a North Carolinian and president of our university System, than seeing the benefits of public higher education come full circle. Winston-Salem State gave Ms. Brown's parents a world of well-earned opportunity; she made the absolute most of their achievements and dedication; and now a rising generation of students will benefit from all that she has accomplished and learned.

I'd like to thank the members of the search advisory committee, and especially Chair Kathleen Kelly for her leadership of this effort. It's been an exceptionally thoughtful and constructive process, highlighting the best of this university and building a sense of shared optimism for the era ahead. As I've said many times, our state's public HBCUs are a source of pride for every North Carolinian, and that was well-affirmed by the strength of the candidates drawn to this position.

It is with great expectations and confidence for a bold future that I nominate Bonita J. Brown as the next chancellor of Winston-Salem State University. Go Rams!