



**UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
February 26, 2026**

Getting at the truth of things is difficult. Human beings are remarkably good at being wrong, from simple mistakes of logic and reasoning all the way up to groupthink and dogma. We bow to social pressure; we mistake feelings for facts. We let orthodoxy crowd out curiosity. No amount of individual brilliance and goodwill can save us from human error.

But we have also developed some remarkable ways of countering our faults. Universities have historically served as one of man's greatest mechanisms for getting at truth. A properly functioning university is designed to guard against our errors and biases, to create a set of rules and habits and professional standards that get us closer to truth. The university should be at the center of what the scholar Jonathan Rauch calls the "Constitution of Knowledge," our operating system for turning doubts and disagreements into knowledge.

That's the purpose behind free inquiry; that's the purpose behind scholarly standards and academic rigor; that's the purpose behind our embrace of free expression and diverse perspectives. It can look like roiling chaos from the outside, but university life is meant to help us discover true things and share them with rising generations.

This month, we're taking two important steps to strengthen that mission during a fraught time for the Constitution of Knowledge, an era of profound stress for every institution committed to truth. For the first time, the UNC System is adopting an actual definition of academic freedom, spelling out much more clearly the purpose, protections, and proper boundaries of scholarly freedom within the university. And at the same time, we're supporting a range of faculty- and student-driven work to build cultures of constructive dialogue and open discourse on our campuses.

I see these efforts as powerfully linked, and necessary responses to the needs and strains of our time. In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of a more censorious culture, marked by a growing tendency to silence people for expressing ideas that go against a prevailing ideology. This is not a *partisan* tendency; it's a human one. The impulse to suppress contrary viewpoints is a constant in history. And in my time here, I have received calls to restrict or punish disfavored speech from left and right. I suspect every one of my predecessors could say the same.

What has changed in recent years is the technology to scapegoat and intimidate people we don't like. Going back decades, organizations as different as FIRE, Heterodox Academy, and the ACLU have documented a sharp rise in attempts to punish others for venturing unpopular views. Sometimes those calls are coming from outside performers, adept at turning campus controversies into online rage bait. Sometimes those calls have come from inside the house, with efforts to enforce conventional orthodoxy when they should be welcoming informed debate. This leads to uncertainty and often cynicism.

In almost every case, smartphones and social media have made things worse. It is easier than ever to gin up a mob and harass individuals. It is easier than ever to put pressure on our institutions to compromise their principles for the sake of quieting a controversy. Every revolution in communications technology creates upheaval for existing institutions, and we're living through one of those unsettling convulsions

right now. The rise of platforms and the decline of institutions serves to elevate emotion over knowledge.

If we want our universities to survive as freethinking, truth-seeking institutions, we need to toughen up our commitment to free inquiry and civic discourse. We must demonstrate, in the plainest terms, that we are upholding our responsibilities as scholars, as students, and as public servants. We must remain committed to the university not as an ungoverned free-for-all, but as an educational institution, with special obligations to elevate reason over reaction and thinking over feeling.

In recent years, we've worked to recommit to the original mission by strengthening our policies on free expression. We've done that by adopting a posture of institutional restraint, keeping administrators out of political commentary so faculty and students have greater freedom to debate and dissent. We've done away with compelled speech. And we've insisted that our universities remain open to students of every background and belief, welcoming to all North Carolinians.

I believe that defining academic freedom, as opposed to simply referring to a vague concept, will help guide us right now. We have long held academic freedom as a fundamental precondition for meeting our mission. Nothing about that foundational value is changing. This expanded definition grew out of a conversation more than a year ago between this office and the Faculty Assembly, reflecting on the fact that academic freedom is frequently invoked in abstract ways during moments of controversy but rarely understood as the day-to-day bedrock of university life. Commonly held definitions help us all share the same reality.

By strengthening the UNC System Code to include more detail about the purpose and parameters of academic freedom, we hope to make it easier for everyone to appreciate the privileges and obligations that come with serving our public universities. This expanded definition offers reasonable, practical guidance for how to balance academic liberties with professional responsibilities and areas of expertise. It acknowledges that the rights and privileges of faculty exist alongside those of students. It expressly protects the exploration of controversial or unpopular ideas, a freedom dear to the American experiment itself.

At the same time, we're making a series of new investments to support dialogue and discourse in our classrooms and in campus life, equipping our students for a culture of open inquiry. In 2022, when a group of UNC System faculty completed a well-designed and comprehensive survey across our public universities, they found that students very much want opportunities to hear different viewpoints and engage with people who think differently. But they're reluctant to voice their own opinions, having seen the way that viral snippets can turn into vicious pile-ons from online mobs.

That's why we're offering new support to student groups and individual faculty members who are promoting constructive dialogue and civic discourse. There are lots of models for building a more open culture on campus, from highly structured debates to deliberative group discussion. Our goal is to seed and water promising efforts already emerging on our campuses, then support the approaches that resonate best. We're also restarting the 2022 survey I just mentioned, since it provided such rich and nuanced insight into the state of our campus cultures. Scholars all over the political spectrum, from the president of Princeton to the head of Heterodox Academy, have praised that survey for its rigor and realism. I'm determined to keep our discussions of this fraught topic grounded in a shared reality.

It took many years of disruption and distraction to reach the challenging state we're in now, and it will take many years of patient recommitment to sustain the culture of inquiry and truth-seeking we need at our universities. It would be easier, in this turbulent moment, to keep our heads down and hope for calmer days ahead, to wish for a return to some mythically serene era. But the truth is that quiet times have been few and far between for American higher education. Our public universities, especially, are purpose-built to be in conversation with the broader public life of our nation. They must remain so by recommitting to their knowledge-seeking mission, or they will deteriorate as other venerable institutions have over the course of time.

This work has never been easy, but it has always been vital.