



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

I know many of you are familiar with the work of Jonathan Haidt, the NYU social psychologist. Haidt is the founder of Heterodox Academy, acclaimed author, and a very sharp thinker about the factors behind our combative civic life.

A few weeks ago, I hosted a reception for Dr. Haidt, following a public lecture he gave for the UNC Program for Public Discourse. His talk focused on a topic we've discussed a lot at the UNC System — the mental health of young people, and the negative impact that smartphones and addictive apps are having on the lives of our students. Haidt has long been interested in the way online platforms can drive political polarization, detailing the way viral social media can spread misinformation, fuel conspiracy theories, and heighten our sense of threat.

His latest work explores the psychological effects of social media on young people. Tracking everything from body image disorders to rising pessimism among younger Americans, Haidt is warning against what he calls a “phone-based childhood.”

Simply put, smartphone screens have crowded out many of the things that make for a good and healthy childhood. Young people have grown up with far less time playing, far less time outdoors, and far less time with friends. They sleep less, exercise less, spend much more time alone, and report staggeringly high rates of depression and anxiety. And I'm quite convinced by the data that Haidt and others have gathered to show that nearly all of these troubling trends accelerated dramatically when phones replaced real life, when screens replaced socializing, when an endless stream of fear and outrage became an algorithmic feature of adolescence.

As you can imagine, this has huge implications for higher education. Our mission isn't just preparing students for promising careers. It's to make them ready for satisfying, meaningful lives; to equip them for citizenship in a vibrant democracy; to help them nurture commitments and relationships that bring purpose to their days.

All of that is much harder if they're anxious and depressed or feel hopeless about the direction of the world and their ability to shape it. We can be quick to blame young people for being too sensitive, for being intolerant of dissenting views, for a campus culture that makes it harder to have good-faith debate or intellectual exploration. But our students were shaped by the tools and distractions *adults* offered them. As others have observed about social media, children aren't the priority, they're the product.

One of the most compelling things Dr. Haidt said during his talk is that our current relationship to technology and online life is a choice, and we could make different choices. In fact, we have

an obligation to make different choices when it comes to young people. We used to prescribe opium to children, he noted, and we stopped when it became clear that we were doing terrible harm. I think we're approaching a similar moment of clarity when it comes to the digital meds freely dispensed to them for the last fifteen years.

The University of North Carolina is not going to single-handedly reform the way our society introduces young people to online life. But we are doing plenty of valuable work to chart a healthier course in the relationship between students and technology. Researchers across the state have explored the health impacts of spending an average of eight hours a day on screen time and social media. Our student affairs professionals help people build healthy relationships and habits of mind. And every day, our faculty are teaching students how to think deeply, disagree respectfully, and encounter the world with open-minded curiosity.

I want to make their jobs a little bit easier. To that end, I've asked our legal and IT teams for a plan to block the most destructive social media apps from UNC System infrastructure. We're targeting a handful of smaller, hyper-local platforms that have shown a reckless disregard for the wellbeing of young people and an outright indifference to bullying and bad behavior. These include YikYak, Fizz, Whisper, and Sidechat, which feature jokes and memes but also turn a blind eye to everything from sexual harassment and racial insults to drug dealing.

These apps, operating only within a five-mile radius of a school to target their students, are the modern equivalent of scrawling cruel rumors on the bathroom wall, except now with a much larger audience. There are reasonable arguments about limited social media usage, generally, but there's simply no value to our campus communities in providing a taxpayer-paid platform for trolling. I had never heard of these apps until a group of student body presidents told me of their ubiquitous presence on our campuses. I appreciate ASG's valuable work in studying the nuances of these questions.

I'm under no illusion that knocking these apps off of our IT networks will cause them to simply go away. Students can and likely will still use their own data plans or find other workarounds. My hope is that this action, admittedly a small step, will prompt deeper reflection about how we're encouraging our students to spend their time, engage with their peers, and cultivate a public square that's worthy of a public university.

As Dr. Haidt said, this isn't a matter of being *against* technology. It's about being *for* a healthy and nurturing environment for our students, for being thoughtful and deliberate in harnessing the best of technology while mitigating the worst. Technology is not a force of nature. It's a deeply human enterprise, and we can — we must — make responsible choices to shape it.