

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
June 21, 2024

There is no institution in North Carolina that better embodies the ambitions, the achievements, and the promise of this state than North Carolina A&T. Since the close of the 19th century, this magnificent beacon of excellence has kept faith with our highest ideals and called North Carolina to the very best version of itself. Practical agriculture and mechanic arts have gotten quite a bit more complex since this place was chartered in 1891, but the core Aggie mission remains as visionary and vital as ever.

I am enormously proud, as every North Carolinian should be, that the UNC System is home to the largest and best HBCU in the nation; the second institution ever chartered under the 1890 Morrill Act; a magnet for talent from across our state and across our country; America's single most productive university for training Black engineers and STEM graduates; the campus that helped establish Greensboro as the cradle of the Civil Rights Movement and a symbol of progress all over the world.

And someday soon, I know we'll all be celebrating with pride when North Carolina A&T becomes the first HBCU in the nation to earn the status of an R1 research university, a mark of academic excellence and scholarly achievement that cements this place as exactly what its founders hoped — the engine of opportunity, uplift, and economic development strong enough to power this state and its people. This is, in every sense, a great American university, and it has been helmed for the last 15 years by one of the finest chancellors in America.

Harold Martin has quite simply set the bar for what visionary and effective leadership looks like in modern higher education. His commitment to this place, his faith in the capacity of North Carolina A&T to grow and adapt, his discipline in setting forth an ambitious plan and doing the hard work of making it real — all of that will redound to the good of this place and its students for decades to come. He's been a friend and mentor to an entire generation of students, faculty, staff, and higher education leaders, including me. And while I will do my very best to let the good Dr. Martin enjoy his retirement, he knows that this whole community will continue to celebrate him, admire him, and occasionally call on him. He's certainly been a close partner in this search. Once an Aggie, always an Aggie.

I'm grateful to say that we are not here to mark the end of the Martin era, but renewal. As we look ahead to this university's continued growth and rising prospects, we have the honor of welcoming a leader with a sharp sense of how to build on the successes of the last 15 years; someone with the experience and focus to engineer new heights of achievement for the Aggies; a chancellor who can uphold exacting standards for himself and his team; someone with a profound, personal understanding of higher education's impact on this state and in the individual lives of the students

we serve. It is my great privilege to nominate Dr. James R. Martin as the next chancellor of North Carolina A&T.

As a son of the rural south, raised not too far from here in South Carolina, Dr. Martin knows just how much higher education has done to light and lift up this region. He's been a student at The Citadel and Virginia Tech; a scholar and an academic leader at Virginia Tech, Clemson University, and the University of Pittsburgh; and a deeply respected voice in the world of civil and environmental engineering nationwide. He has offered expertise everywhere from small-town planning departments to the U.S. Navy, bringing an engineer's eye for detail and a civil engineer's appreciation for public service.

He's also had a career of firsts, paving the way for future scholars and leaders as a vice chancellor, a dean, a department chair, a founder and institute director, and a widely respected academic researcher. Spend any time at all with Dr. Martin, and you'll appreciate that this is someone with a precise mind, a good heart, and an understated knack for bringing out the best work in those around him. Everywhere he's served, Dr. Martin has been methodical about recognizing the potential for partnerships within and beyond the university walls; for recruiting talented people to worthy projects and ensuring they have the resources to thrive; and for building teams that unify diverse backgrounds and worldviews behind a common cause.

Dr. Martin believes in what he calls "impatient optimism," a productive sense of possibility in what can be achieved when people think across disciplines, feel a sense of shared purpose, and commit to an ambitious vision. It's exactly the kind of mindset that will help make Preeminence 2030 a reality and affirm North Carolina A&T's status as one of the nation's best research institutions and engines of social mobility.

Throughout his career, Dr. Martin has put a laudable emphasis on community building as a core aspect of leadership. He has a bedrock belief that organizational culture — the trust we have in one another, the sense of goodwill and confidence in our ability to do shared work — matters enormously to what we can achieve on behalf of the people we serve. In each of his past roles, Dr. Martin is known for close and patient listening, for sparking the kind of aspirational conversations that get people excited to take on new challenges and find areas of improvement. He speaks of helping organizations find and hone their transformative purpose, the meaningful mission that unites diverse teams in pursuit of common goals.

That conviction about the value of community and culture stems not just from Dr. Martin's own experiences, but from decades of research on how organizations and societies respond in moments of crisis and challenge. His work as a civil engineer and a scholar focuses on agency and resilience in the face of difficulty, and I can think of no better discipline for the task of leading a public institution through an unquiet era.

That eagerness to navigate unsettled waters came through in all of our conversations with Dr. Martin. This university has as much momentum and goodwill as any in the nation, but it is not exempt from the broader economic, social, and political forces that are testing old models and old assumptions in higher education. The need to serve more first-generation students and working adults; the urgency of preparing graduates for the world's most dynamic and innovative economy, which has done so much to transform this region and this institution just in my lifetime; the critical importance of maintaining public confidence in an era of rising skepticism and polarization. Dr. Martin recognizes all of those challenges and isn't deterred by any of them.

It's reassuring, in fact, to be nominating someone with deep confidence and expertise in the field of risk management. Chancellors don't just lay the groundwork for success and achievement; they also work hard to manage and mitigate the many challenges that come with running a small city. Dr. Martin's background as a civil engineer and the director of campus centers devoted to the study of risk and recovery should be a great asset in the chancellor's office, and I plan to call on him for advice and guidance during our many UNC System conversations about how to strengthen our institutions and do right by the people we all serve.

The Aggies have been doing right and doing well for more than 130 years. I am staggered when I think about the scale of change and growth this institution has seen. Created in the waning years of reconstruction; adapting and thriving through world wars and a depression; nurturing the civil rights movement and navigating proudly through the changes of that era; emerging in our current unsettled moment as one of the brightest lights of American higher education, welcoming talent from every part of the state and every corner of the nation — North Carolina A&T is living up to its mantra of advancing the human condition, and advancing our state.

I want to thank the entire Aggie community for its devotion to this place and the thoughtful input during the past several months. Nobody really wanted to contemplate a post-Martin future — and it turns out we don't really have to! — but I'm grateful to the members of the search advisory committee, especially committee Chair Hilda Pinnix-Ragland and Board of Trustees Chair Kim Gatling, for stepping up to a daunting task and performing it with pride, professionalism, and a deep confidence in the promise of this place. I said earlier that we're not marking the end of an era for North Carolina A&T; we're here to celebrate its renewal and reinvention. With humility and a great helping of Aggie Pride, it's my pleasure to nominate Dr. James Martin as the next chancellor of North Carolina A&T State University.