



The Charlotte Carolina Club Davie Dinner 2016

Thank you, Ed, for that introduction and for your leadership—Carolina is lucky to have you.

It's a pleasure to be here with all of you tonight. Though she couldn't be here this evening, I want to thank your chancellor, Carol Folt, for being such a generous friend and guide since I first arrived in Chapel Hill. Your campus is quite literally my backyard, and it's been a joy getting to know the place.

Let me also acknowledge Eric Locher '78, long-time chair of the Davie Dinner Committee; Teresa Williams '77, this year's Chair of the General Alumni Association Board; and Carolina Trustees Kelly Hopkins '95 and Jeff Brown '81. They've all worked hard to make this event possible, so please join me in thanking them.

I'd like to begin tonight with an important announcement. For several months, I've been planning a major initiative, an undertaking that will prove both complex and disruptive. It's going to be tough, but I think it's really going to be a game-changer.

After much debate and research, and nearly eight months into my time here in North Carolina, I have finally gotten a puppy. And his name, of course, is Davie. He's a labradoodle, and he enjoys tromping around in the Chapel Hill woods just as much as his namesake apparently did. He hasn't founded anything yet, but he's still young.

I hope that helps you appreciate just how much it means to be here with you at the annual Davie Dinner, an event that honors the University of North Carolina's history by securing the University's future. You all clearly understand the value of scholarships and financial aid in sustaining the proudly public mission of UNC Chapel Hill. This General Alumni Association does fantastic work by helping every young person who earns a place at Carolina afford a world-class education, something that only happens thanks to the dedicated support of people like you.

A scholarship doesn't just benefit the student who earns it — it benefits the whole University. Across the country, you see the best and most competitive schools investing heavily in scholarships and aid because that's what brings the most talented students. That's what ensures that hard work and accomplishment are what matter when a school like Carolina is making admissions decisions. That's what eliminates barriers to access. It's about fairness and affordability for families, but also about excellence for this institution and this state.

And Chapel Hill offers astounding proof that it works. At a time when so many public flagships are loosening connections to their home states, you all have shown that it's possible to be a world-class, globally competitive research institution while keeping your roots firmly planted here in North Carolina.

You have a faculty that tackles some of the most daunting challenges in our world — from clean energy to cancer to astrophysics to polymer science. As I said in my inaugural address last month, there aren't many places in the world where you can shake hands with two Nobel Prize winners in a single morning, but you can do it in Chapel Hill. This week I toured the medical school—which exemplifies the impact this University has on the day to day lives of North Carolinians and long-term well-being of the state.

That's an astounding achievement for any university, but especially for a place built and sustained by public support. So thank you for all that you're doing to advance that cause, to make sure that the University by the People is truly open to all of the people of this state.

Making a quality education available to more students is going to be increasingly important in the years ahead. And not just at Carolina, but at all of our public institutions across the state. I firmly believe that higher education has to become a near-universal expectation for a rising generation of North Carolinians and Americans. And not just for young people, but all of those who are ready and able to improve their lives through education.

That doesn't mean a four-year degree is necessary for everyone. But some education beyond high school — a bachelor's, and associate's, a certificate — has to become the new normal, much like high school became a set expectation for our parents and grandparents. Our economy and our civic life are simply going to demand it. And our public universities need to be ready to do something we have not done before.

Right now, we are leaving tremendous talent on the table, both in North Carolina and the nation. There are huge gaps in college attainment between urban and rural areas; between rich and poor; between majority and minority communities. We have too many people whose lives and ambitions are limited by inadequate schools and not nearly enough guidance about the world they're going to face and the opportunities for them in it.

Does anyone here believe that the God-given talent of our fellow citizens is sorted by race or zip code? That the income of your parents is a fair and accurate measure of your natural ability and your work ethic?

I certainly don't. So the fact that these things are the predictors of college enrollment and graduation means that we've got a lot of work to do.

The good news is that we already have some of the best-funded, best-performing public institutions anywhere in the country. More than just about any other state, North Carolina has consistently invested in its universities, and that has paid huge dividends in terms of our

economic vitality and our quality of life. That's a key reason I was so excited to come here—it's the competitive advantage that has distinguished us from so many other states.

Across all 16 of our public universities, the graduation rate is a full ten percentage points higher than the national average. And at UNC Chapel Hill — which had more than a century's head start in the whole higher education business — you have a six-year graduation rate over ninety percent, among the highest in the country.

A large part of that is because you're an excellent school with considerable resources. Advocates and supporters like you make it possible for Carolina to offer the aid, the advising, the mentoring and hands-on teaching that really make a difference for students.

But part of it, too, is because you're often working with some of the strongest and best-prepared students in the state. Earning a place at Chapel Hill is not easy, so the students arriving on campus are generally ready for the work.

Figuring out how to extend your success — your phenomenal retention and graduation rates — to a much broader population of students across a range of different institutions — that is going to be the crucial challenge for higher education in the years ahead both in this state and across the country.

As some of you know, my staff and the Board of Governors are hard at work on a new strategic plan for the University system. We've been holding listening sessions across the state, learning more about what people want and expect—what they need—from their public institutions.

And a lot of what we're hearing centers on affordability — the challenge you all are helping tackle here tonight. It centers on flexibility — giving students and families a lot of different options for pursuing their ambitions beyond high school, and being very clear about what those options are. It centers on the plain reality of changing demographics, and how that's going to drive change in our institutions.

North Carolina is getting both older and more diverse. And that means we have to get a whole lot better at serving students who have historically struggled with college access and completion. How well we're able to serve low-income, minority, and rural students is going to define whether North Carolina is a thriving or lagging state in the decades ahead. How well we're able to serve veterans, working parents, and other adult learners is going to determine whether we can navigate economic change or get swamped by it.

It's not enough to serve some students exceptionally well. It's not enough to offer some students a world of opportunity. Our politics, our society, our country can't tolerate that kind of disparity. We've got to do something about it. If the election this week told us anything, we must do something about it.

And I think a new strategic plan will make the difference. Stronger metrics and clearer incentives for student success will help get us there.

But the real work of strengthening our universities and building a better quality of life has to come from all of you — people who have benefitted from the far-sighted work and investment of the North Carolinians who came before you, and are now in a position to lend your voices and your energy and your resources to the challenges ahead.

I have been in public life a long time, from legislative work in Texas to a cabinet post in Washington, and I think we're at a moment in our country's history when people feel just plain worn out by politics. You all went to a pretty decent college, so maybe you remember the famous line from Yeats: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

That certainly feels true some days. But the solution isn't to duck our heads and hope for better. It's to summon our own passionate intensity, to nurture our own sense of responsibility for the institutions that have meant so much to us and mean so much in the life of our state.

William R. Davie, the namesake for our gathering here this evening, wrote a letter to Governor Alexander Martin on November 1st, 1790, reminding him of the enormous work that lay ahead in building the country's very first public university.

"You will, I am certain, give the University every assistance in your power, as a man who knows the importance of education in a country just forming its manners and its Government."

That was 226 years ago. But we are very much a country still forming its manners and its Government, still grappling with what it means to extend opportunity to every one of our citizens, still broadening the boundaries of knowledge, still raising our expectations for the future. That work is never done.

And so you will, I am certain, give this University every assistance in your power — now and always.

Thank you.