

The Inaugural Address

Margaret Spellings, the 18th President of the University of North Carolina

October 13, 2016

Good morning. I want to ask some big questions today.

What if all North Carolinians reached their full potential? What would that mean for our state, and what would it take to get us there?

What if all of our citizens, at any age, could get the kind of education they need, when and where they need it, at a price they can afford? What would it mean for their lives and careers - for their families, for their children?

And what would that mean for our economy? For the civic and cultural life of our state? For our competitiveness and prosperity?

If those questions seem daunting, imagine what this University's original charge must have sounded like back in 1776, when the ink had barely dried on the Declaration of Independence and this place was still a tree-covered hillside. Our state's founders declared that, "All useful Learning shall be duly encouraged and promoted in one or more Universities."

All Useful Learning.

That, too, was a revolutionary idea. It was a monumental goal then, and an even bigger challenge to us now.

What is "all useful learning" for a student today?

We know the world is more competitive, and the best jobs of the future demand education beyond high school. We know there is promise and potential in every corner of this state - in every town, every district, every classroom. And we know that economic and social mobility help define the American Dream.

So - are we doing all that we can to create opportunity for everyone? To deliver on the promise of all useful learning?

We have a constitutional mandate to provide a quality education as free as practicable. At his own inaugural some 30 years ago, President Dick Spangler - who is with us here today - defined that promise simply: No one in our state is denied a college education because of lack of money.

Are we keeping that historic promise? Are we living up to that ideal? Or has that challenge only deepened in the past three decades?

I don't raise these questions because I doubt the greatness of the University of North Carolina. I raise them because I *believe* in it so deeply.

In the 18th century, North Carolina took the lead in recognizing higher education as the foundation of a free society.

Today, we must lead again in recognizing quality higher education as a new civil right - a vital part of our founding promise.

That means making education beyond high school possible for all. That's never been done before - not here, not anywhere else. but it's plainly needed if our state and our people are going to thrive in the century ahead.

We have one of the finest university systems in the country, what former President Bill Friday called a mighty engine, sustained by generations of hard work and patient investment.

But we also have too many citizens whose lives and ambitions are limited by geography, by income, by struggling K-12 schools, or by tuition that seems out of reach.

We can do something about that.

It can be easy to forget when you live in a thriving region or graduate from one of the state's top high schools, but most North Carolinians don't have a college education or the opportunities that come with it.

We can and we must do something about that.

The opportunity to pursue an education beyond high school is far from equal across our state. A high school senior in one county can be twice as likely to earn a college degree as a classmate in a neighboring district. Statistics are not destiny, but a few miles can make a world of difference. We can't allow a child's future to be dependent on zip code.

Nor can we afford to let economic hardship limit potential.

Today we are leaving behind thousands of capable students who never even apply to college because it doesn't seem possible for them. Low-income students enroll in college at far lower rates than their wealthier peers, even when test scores and academic performance are the same.

That's a tragic waste of talent, and we absolutely must do something about that.

At a time when our state and our nation are growing more diverse - when the school-age population

in North Carolina is almost 50% minority and growing - we absolutely cannot tolerate pernicious gaps in opportunity.

Racial disparities in education undermine our future and discredit our ideals. They challenge our founding conviction that all of us are created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights - rights more fully realized through education.

We can - we simply must - do something about that.

I have faith that we can meet these challenges because we've done big things before. In 1940, after years of a grinding depression and with a world war breaking out, fewer than one in four Americans had a high school diploma.

Our nation stood on the brink of enormous technological and global change, facing a future we couldn't possibly predict. Yet instead of being paralyzed by uncertainty, leaders at every level responded with confidence in the capacity of our people. We didn't limit our expectations - we raised them.

That far-sighted decision helped drive the growth and prosperity of the last century. The dedicated expansion of public schooling allowed the United States to build the best-educated, most highly skilled society the world had ever seen.

Today, nearly 9 in 10 Americans have a high school diploma. Their lives are better for it; our democracy is stronger because of it; and our economy is the wealthiest and most innovative in the world. Mass public education was an American invention that underpinned the American century.

It's time to raise our expectations once again. Higher education is the next frontier - a new civil right. Every child must be able to reach beyond high school - that has to become our expectation, our promise for a rising generation.

That may mean a four-year degree, a master's or a doctorate; it could also mean an associate degree or a professional credential.

Whatever form it takes, quality higher education has become a critical measure of our standing in the world. After a century of leading the way, we've begun to fall back.

For our most vulnerable students, the cost of higher education is daunting. We know that college can be life-changing for those who graduate, opening a world of possibility that echoes across generations.

But it can also be life-altering for those who don't graduate, leaving them indebted and adrift. As the cost of college has risen, so too has the cost of failure.

We need to lower the risk of pursuing opportunity.

When I finished high school in Houston, Texas - with three younger sisters following close behind - my parents didn't have to mortgage their house, raid their retirement, or spend their life savings. They didn't have to pass the burden on to their children.

I remember going to my mother each semester, asking for the few hundred dollars I needed for tuition and books - well within reach for a middle-class family. I could cover the rest with a part-time job at the Handy Andy grocery store.

And my college years weren't *that* long ago.

Since then, the cost of higher education has outpaced inflation, health care, and just about everything else. Public anxiety has risen along with it. Of course, the payoff is still there for those who are prepared to do the work and finish on time, and North Carolina's public universities remain a remarkable value. Strong state support has kept our public colleges among the best and most affordable in the country.

But for too many students - those who borrowed and didn't graduate, those who spent too much time and money before finding their way - the payoff is harder to see.

Our system too often fails those who come from rural, low-income, first-generation, and minority families. They are the students most likely to leave school with debt but no degree; to take longer than necessary to graduate; to languish in expensive remedial classes; or to forego college altogether.

As long as we tolerate such divides in opportunity, the fundamental promise of public education remains unfulfilled.

We must make known the lasting value of quality higher education to a public that has grown more skeptical, to lawmakers facing difficult choices, and to students and families making one of the biggest decisions of their lives.

As President of this University, my job is to help define success - what does it mean to be accessible, affordable and efficient, to have excellent and diverse institutions, and to make a real impact on the economy and wellbeing of North Carolina? How do we define student success and hold ourselves accountable for achieving it?

Answering those questions will mean thinking differently about how we do our work, how we meet students wherever they are and prepare them well.

We must adapt the way we teach, the way we advise, the way we mentor and guide students. We must give people choices about the kind of education that works best for them.

That means straightforward tools and information about borrowing, about the career prospects for different degrees and majors, and about the expectations for success at each of our institutions.

We must explore new ways of making education available to working men and women, to returning veterans, to parents and professionals. We need creative partnerships with community colleges, local

governments, businesses, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and civil rights leaders to raise our expectations of higher education for all.

Many of our institutions were founded as teacher's colleges, and the University of North Carolina is still the single largest source of teachers for our public schools. We need to strengthen their work through research, professional development, and deeper connections between K12 classrooms, community colleges, and the University.

Every one of us can remember a teacher who made a difference. For me, Ms. Brown, my choir teacher, who was my model for what a strong, capable, working woman was like. And I *know* that our campuses are preparing those role models for a new generation.

We all share a stake in this. A better-educated state holds the promise of a stronger economy and a greater quality of life - public goods in every sense.

And I know we're equal to the task.

Our campuses are home to some of the brightest, most creative, most dedicated people in the world. I've had the privilege of meeting many of them in my travels, and seeing firsthand what a remarkable place this is.

For starters, I met a pickle that can paint - probably better than I can.

I got a very generous lesson in scratching and mixing, and I'll be releasing the remix of this talk soon.

I found the perfect slogan for our Board's new strategic plan, and it fits beautifully on a t-shirt.

I discovered that it's possible, with the right company, to look pretty stylish in a golf cart.

And I've learned that barbecue can be a politically touchy subject, so when asked east or west, "brisket" is never the right answer.

I also spent time with doctors and nurses who move between treating patients and teaching some of the most advanced life-saving techniques anywhere in the world.

I saw the way a university can embody the pride and aspirations of an entire community.

I heard stories of professors who taught late into the night, giving soldiers and airmen the chance to earn a degree while serving our country.

I shook hands with two Nobel prizewinners in a single morning, a powerful reminder of the world-changing research that our faculty perform every day.

And I felt the sheer joy of a stage full of young people who sang about the founding of the United States in a language so rich and so new you simply had to marvel.

These are the workaday miracles that public universities perform. These and a thousand more, each day, in every corner of our state.

If we can do all of that, then I believe we can redefine what equal opportunity means for our students.

With 17 unique institutions working toward a shared mission, we have the scale and the imagination to tackle any problem.

Every one of our institutions arose to meet specific needs at a specific time, and each one has grown and evolved as our state has changed. That rich inheritance is now united under a single banner as the University of North Carolina. We are unique among states in having this magnificent laboratory for taking on some of the biggest challenges.

For more than two centuries, we have enjoyed the support of our citizens and policymakers.

Our governor, our legislators, our Board of Governors, and the people of this state firmly believe in the life-changing power of higher education. They believe in the mission of this University - the people's University.

That's why the rest of the world has long looked to North Carolina for leadership, and that's why there's nowhere I'd rather be than right here, right now.

I am a fierce believer in the power of good public policy to change lives for the better. I've spent my entire career working to bring people together. There is strong disagreement in our democracy about a great many things, but not about this - not about the need for our public universities to serve all students well. Not about the benefit we all gain from strong colleges and universities.

The big questions I raised at the start of this talk aren't rhetorical. I really want to know what it would mean to educate every person in this state to their fullest ability; what it would take to renew our constitutional mandate for a new generation; to redefine All Useful Learning for a new era.

I believe it would mean a stronger public life. Democracy has never been easy or simple, which is why education is among the first responsibilities of citizenship.

It would mean a more resilient economy, with more of our people ready to face a changing world.

And it would mean greater hope. For students and their families, expanded access to college means the freedom to choose their own paths, to shape their own lives and ambitions. We know a degree earned today opens a world of opportunity tomorrow. And we know that gift extends for generations, a virtuous cycle that changes lives and benefits us all.

All Useful Learning demands an all-in effort. It calls for the faith and optimism of our citizens, the wisdom and goodwill of our policymakers, the brilliance and dedication of our faculty and staff.

And it calls for the very best in our students. Their dreams and ambitions have always broadened the boundaries of higher education, raising our expectations and renewing the promise of this University.

I believe in that promise, and I know you do as well. It's time to lift our sights once again, to make All Useful Learning the confident hope of all our citizens. Together, we can make higher education our higher EXPECTATION for every person in North Carolina.

Thank you.