

**UNC System President Margaret Spellings: Remarks to State Board of Education
April 5, 2018**

Thank you, Chairman Cobey. I appreciate that, and I appreciate your leadership of this Board and your many years of service to our state.

Superintendent Johnson, Mark, great to see you again. Members of the Board, thank you for your service. I appreciate the opportunity to be with you. I feel like I'm in my old stomping grounds.

I actually visited this building, obviously since I've been here in North Carolina, as well as when I was Secretary of Education. And I was reminded, that you all had a delegation that I'm told was the "bus from hell" when you all came to see me as Secretary about the implementation of No Child Left Behind. I'm off the script now, but Texas and North Carolina are really pioneers around a lot of the education reforms, so we have been "simpatico" for a long time.

I hope you agree that North Carolina has, without question, one of the finest University Systems in the nation. I know that many of you are alumni of this outstanding System, and I know there's at least one faculty member on this Board.

It is not an accident that we are as fine as we are. It's the result of an enduring partnership with our legislature and consistent support over many decades – and even centuries – from the citizens of this state, who have long understood what an important game changer higher education is.

We are good, we are great, and we're getting better every day.

We have raised our graduation rate more than six percentage points in the last five years.

We've increased our annual outside research funding by more than \$300 million. Today, we net one and a half billion dollars in research investments every single year, which does more than just educate folks, it drives our economy.

We're filling jobs in vital fields, producing nearly 21,000 graduates each year with degrees and certificates in health sciences, engineering, and STEM — an increase of 29 percent since 2011.

We're graduating nearly 20 percent more low-income students each year than we did in 2011.

And thanks to the legislature's strong financial commitment, tuition for North Carolinians is flat or falling at every one of our institutions.

We are getting stronger. But it's no cause for complacency. As I like to say, we are pleased but not satisfied.

The question before us now is how we uphold our core mission in a rapidly changing world. And importantly for this body, how does our continued success depend on preparing students early in their career for a lifetime of continued learning? What is the responsibility of higher education institutions outside of those students who walk our halls and beyond the years they study in our lecture halls?

North Carolina is the place where we can — where we must — answer that question. Our state mirrors the most significant trends affecting the country — a political battleground with shifting demographics and an economy that’s growing well, but unevenly.

The University System is, as UNC President Bill Friday famously said, a “mighty engine” for shaping these forces. And over the years, that engine’s power has come from a willingness to adapt and change. Land grant universities expanded our idea of “all useful learning” well beyond the classical liberal arts, recognizing higher education’s essential role in a modern economy.

Campuses were transformed once again when the GI Bill expanded our vision of college, ushering in a broad middle class.

And the struggle for civil rights established the opportunity to learn and achieve as the birthright of all Americans.

And today, we’re embracing that legacy of thoughtful change as we set higher expectations for ourselves and our state.

As we move ahead, there are three big issues that both keep me up at night and give me confidence in our mission.

And while these issues profoundly impact higher education, they are issues that matter greatly for our entire educational continuum from Pre-K through higher ed and into the workforce.

Mobility

The first issue is economic mobility — to me, the defining issue of our time.

The American Dream holds that talent and hard work lead to a better life.

When that belief begins to fray, we all suffer. Our politics become more troubled, and we fail to tap the talent we need to thrive and survive.

Our region — from Southern Virginia to Mississippi — is struggling with mobility. Children born into poverty in the South have strikingly low odds of bettering their lives.

In North Carolina, our metro areas rank among the worst in the nation for upward mobility, with cities like Raleigh, Charlotte, Greensboro, and Fayetteville, all in the bottom 10 percent of America’s metro areas.

But we have the power to change that dynamic, because higher education is a proven route to economic mobility.

When we meet our core mission — reaching talented students from all backgrounds, getting them in the door, and helping them graduate — we change lives, lift families, and transform communities.

This is an access issue. Earning a place in college must not depend on the color of your skin, the income of your family, or the zip code where you grew up.

It's also a student success issue. Your odds of graduating should depend on work ethic and academic performance, not your parents' resources.

And it's a community impact issue. The jobs created by our alumni, the healthcare provided by our hospitals and medical graduates, the new industries developed by our researchers — they improve the quality of life for everyone, not just those who study at our campuses.

But the disparities and achievement gaps impacting upward mobility are a long-time coming. They don't start at age 18.

That's why we've formed the MyFutureNC Commission to take a hard look at how North Carolina can harness the entire educational continuum, from pre-k through postsecondary and into the workforce.

Today, we're one of just five states that lack a statewide goal for how many of our citizens need education beyond high school. That must change, and I appreciate Superintendent Johnson's support, along with non-profit, business, faith and education leaders and representatives from the House, Senate and Governor's office, as we advance that work.

At the end of the year, the commission will set a statewide goal for the percent of North Carolinians that need some form of education beyond high school.

It will also lay out the benchmarks to hit along the way: targets for third grade literacy, eighth grade proficiency in reading and math, college readiness, and so on.

And finally, it will recommend the policy reforms and initiatives necessary to achieve those goals and targets.

I'm not a believer in college-for-all, and I don't know any university president or business leader who is. But I am a believer in education and training beyond high school for everyone, whether that's on a campus, on the job, or through military service. We must have a system that works better for every student, not just those who are likely to attend a four-year university.

We must build a college-going culture, one that puts college within the reach of every North Carolinian. But it must also be a culture that encourages and integrates a wide range of options from apprenticeship programs, to college credit for military service, to on-the-job training that counts toward a degree or certificate.

This all starts with a strong public school system. Which is why strengthening our K-12 schools, and supporting the work of this Board, is a major focus of MyFutureNC.

It's also a major focus of the UNC System's colleges of education. We're proud of the nearly 40 percent of the state's teachers that we prepare. In fact, on average our teachers outperform their peers.

To make sure we are doing all we can, we recently commissioned a look-under-the-hood at our colleges of education to see where we can improve.

Because put simply, our achievement gaps are too large and proficiency levels too low for us to be content with the overall quality of our schools and teaching.

What the review found was that we often don't prepare our teachers well enough for them to be ready on day one to implement the evidence-based teaching practices that can help a struggling student learn, or to use the classroom management techniques that can control an unruly or unproductive classroom.

We must better incorporate state standards into our curriculum, we must ensure we teach the interventions and strategies that are backed by sound research, and we must strengthen our partnerships with school districts and increase in-classroom experience for our teacher candidates. This is a personal priority for me, and I'm optimistic about what we can do. I'm grateful for the strong support of our deans of education, and for our teacher preparation advisory board, co-chaired by two UNC System leaders as well as former CMS Superintendent Ann Clark.

It's going to take hard work to help ensure every North Carolinian, regardless of background, is ready for whatever educational option fits their needs and allows them to earn a good job and a shot at the American Dream. And it's going to take all of us working together to do it.

Accountability

Progress will also require holding our own feet to the fire. Which is why accountability is the second key issue for the UNC System.

Higher education has suffered from a 'send us the money and leave us alone' kind of attitude.

What we do is legitimately hard to measure, and many of the benefits we bring to individuals and the broader society take a long time to mature. So, we've told people to trust us.

But I believe that era is over.

In K-12 that era has long been over. The extent to which measurable student outcomes drives policymaking might still be a point of contention, but it forms the core of your discussions and debates. That same shift has come to higher education and it's overdue.

Done right, better data and higher standards are tools for greater flexibility and better decision-making at every level, whether it's teachers, principals and superintendents in K-12, or deans, chancellors and system presidents in higher education.

Accountability doesn't hinder talented leaders — it lets them work more effectively.

For the UNC System, that's what our strategic plan is all about, and why it won unanimous support from the UNC Board of Governors.

We've signed 17 customized performance agreements with each chancellor in the UNC System, all of them embracing measurable outcomes as a route to excellence.

Each institution's progress, — along with the system as a whole — will be on display in newly launched data dashboards, showing the public exactly how we're doing.

But to truly understand our own operation, evaluate our programs, and drive better decision making, we must also reform and align how we currently collect and act on our data.

Frustrating data systems and a persistent lack of useful information is a problem that's familiar to this Board. As you all know, we've made progress on our P-20 data systems but it's far from enough.

That's why the UNC System, has made data modernization our top priority for May's legislative short session. And it's why we're committed to projects like our partnership with DPI and the National Student Clearinghouse to track cohorts of students across K-12 and into postsecondary education so we can better identify gaps and barriers and address them.

Recently, on the national stage, we've seen a deeply discouraging retreat on shared standards and accountability. That includes a retreat in our K-12 schools.

I understand, better than many, the frustration with tests and metrics and the appeal of rhetoric about local control. But blaming data collection for the failings of education, I believe, is just shooting the messenger.

Public Good

Our bottom line matters. But, so do the values that are hard to show on a dashboard.

Fulfilling our historic mission to advance the public good is our third, and in many ways the most fundamental issue we face.

A great many of the people in this state who run businesses, teach our children, heal our families, enrich our culture, and set our public policy will pass through the doors of our universities.

What we teach, the behavior we expect, and the standards we model as teachers and public officials helps set the tone for our graduates and the world beyond.

That's an enormous responsibility, and one that you share.

What we do every day as educators and public institutions matters. We must stand behind the core values of free expression, intellectual diversity, and patient engagement with new ideas.

Our campuses bring together people from different backgrounds to gather in the same place, debate the same books, and navigate the same social life. A college education remains one of the most integrated and intellectually demanding experiences in American life.

As are our public K-12 schools. Integrated school districts have driven social change for decades, public schooling has long shaped minds, worldviews and perspectives. It's an intense responsibility for us as policymakers to support those environments.

Our students recognize the privilege of thinking and learning. They want to live up to that gift, to leave the world in better shape than they found it.

That's clearer today than it has been for decades, as the passion and outspoken activism that's often been more at home in higher education, has emerged in full force at our middle and high schools.

What's apparent to me is that anyone who said that students have lost their heads or their desire to be good citizens isn't paying attention.

And I promise you this — our students have been paying attention to us. They're watching how we lead and govern, how we engage in public debate, and how we adapt to the needs of our time.

It's up to us to show that public institutions are an ally in the effort to make a better world. That public service is honorable and effective. That trust in our fellow citizens, and faith in the country that unites us, is vital to any vision of real progress.

Conclusion

Leading the UNC System and its thousands of faculty and staff who come work every day in our labs and classrooms, on our police departments and maintenance crews, in our hospitals and health clinics — I'm inspired by their drive to make a difference. And their impact is far reaching — all across this state, in all 100 of North Carolina's counties.

As a Board, I know you see the same thing in school districts across this state. Our job is to enable that good work and to build a college-going culture that encourages every North Carolinian to see education beyond high school as pivotal to their future.

Cultivating higher expectations is what leadership is all about. If we can elevate the expectations of the people around us, progress will follow.

We need your help to make that big lift here in North Carolina: to aim high, using education's power to supply opportunity and support society, and holding ourselves accountable to meet those lofty goals.

This will be a major priority for me over the coming years. I will be making the case to the people of North Carolina that higher education is not an elite luxury but a tool for all of us. Something that's within reach and relevant to the world we're facing.

UNC System President Friday used to issue a powerful challenge to students, a challenge that I love.

"Every morning," he said, "a million North Carolinians get up and go to work for wages which leave them below the poverty line, so they can pay taxes that finance the education you receive. Your job is to figure out how you're going to pay them back."



I'm proud to say that we have been and are answering that call. And together, tackling the full continuum of learning, we'll be standing together in a few years to report an even stronger, more prosperous state of North Carolina.

Thank you.