Thank you, George, for that introduction and for your leadership here at the Arboretum.

I often say this University System is one of the strongest and most diverse systems in the nation, but that’s often focused on the range of HBCUs and MSIs, the R1s alongside the comprehensive universities, the significant reach back into K-12 through early and middle colleges and our gem, the School of Science and Math, which is moving west with a satellite campus in Morganton.

But that’s just a piece of the diversity of our System. It’s also here in affiliates like the Arboretum. The work that happens on these nearly 500 acres and across the state through your partnerships and extended reach is amazing. And the potential for growth is even greater.

We often hear about the unique challenges of Western North Carolina – mobility, infrastructure, healthcare – but we don’t often spend enough time talking about the region’s unique strengths.

And what the Arboretum does in leveraging, extending, and protecting this region’s natural resources – tapping them responsibly in pursuit of greater knowledge, understanding and prosperity – is a game changer for this area and the state, just as it was envisioned more than 30 years ago at its founding.

So thank you, George, for your work. I look forward to working with you to ensure that the Arboretum’s power is leveraged by all 17 institutions of the UNC System.

I want to recognize a few leaders here today, including members of the Board of Governors.

And we also have a number of Representatives and Senators. Will you please all stand so we can recognize you?

Your support is what makes our University System possible.

And of course, thanks to our institutions’ terrific leaders. Here today are Western Carolina University Acting Chancellor Alison Morrison-Shetlar, UNC Asheville Interim Chancellor Joe Urgo, and Appalachian State University Provost Darrell Kruger.

We’re lucky to have your leadership, and that of Chancellor Sheri Everts, in our System.

Thank you for your vision, for the momentum you’re creating, and for the dedication you show every day.

I know we also have a number of members of Boards of Trustees, administrative and faculty leaders, and local business and civic leaders from across the region. Thank you all for being here.

Today, we’re gathered together for a progress report, a reflection on the state of our 17 institutions and our affiliates.
North Carolina has built, without question, one of the finest university systems in the nation. And it’s getting better every day.

Our graduation rate is up more than six percentage points in the last five years. Our annual research funding is up $300 million in the same period, and we now net one and a half billion dollars in research investments every single year, with over $1 billion at Chapel Hill.

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, all while increasing our Pell-eligible graduates by more than 20 percent.

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

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

The question before us now is how we uphold our core mission in a rapidly changing world. How does higher education once again rise to meet our world’s rising challenges and opportunities?

North Carolina is the place where we can — where we must — answer that charge. Our state mirrors the most significant trends affecting our country — passionate politics, shifting demographics, and an economy growing well, but unevenly.

We have, as UNC President Bill Friday famously said, a “mighty engine” for shaping these forces. And over the years, its power and potential has come from a willingness to adapt and reinvent.

The creation of land grant universities, the passage of the GI Bill, the struggle for civil rights: each step has expanded our idea of what college is for and whom it should serve.

Today, we face another moment of reinvention, one that holds more opportunity than downside if we embrace our legacy of change and set higher expectations for ourselves.

It’s a moment we must seize because the stakes are too high. The future of Western North Carolina as a vibrant, growing region that benefits all its residents depends on higher education evolving, collaborating, and embracing change.

That’s our approach as a System. We’re guided by the emerging needs of our state and by the Strategic Plan the Board of Governors unanimously adopted just over a year ago and we are focused on North Carolina’s shared concerns.

Specifically, I see three big issues that both keep me up at night, as is said, but also give me confidence in the importance of our mission.

**Mobility**

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

Western North Carolina knows this well. There’s a sharp divide between those who have and have not benefited from a growing state economy. Across the state, cities like Greensboro, Charlotte, Fayetteville, and Raleigh rank among the worst cities for economic mobility in the nation and our rural areas, in counties like Avery, Madison, Graham, and Cherokee aren’t seeing the new jobs and growth that they need.

But we know we can change the region’s opportunity deficit. The data confirm that public universities do remarkable work in lifting low-income students to a better life.

When we meet our core mission — reaching talented students from all backgrounds, getting them in the door, and helping them graduate — college changes lives and lifts families.

But our impact is felt far beyond our graduates.

It’s felt as we fill shortages in critical fields like healthcare and teaching.

It’s felt as our research and expertise make the region competitive for industries and companies from across the country.

And it’s felt as our faculty and graduates help grow local businesses and create new start-ups that create jobs for the entire region.

We’re here to serve all North Carolinians, not just those who enroll. That happens through economic development and healthcare work, which is being elevated to the next level thanks to the commitment by North Carolina voters to the Connect NC Bond, which is funding overhauls to Science and Healthcare buildings at all three institutions here in Western North Carolina.

But our commitment to all North Carolinians also means we must welcome and support alternative paths to opportunity.

I’m not a believer in college-for-all, and I don’t know any university president who is. But I am a believer in education and training beyond high school for nearly everyone, whether that’s in school, on the job, or through military service.

We are steadily losing good jobs for high school graduates and gaining positions that require more education. Our universities must support apprenticeship programs, grant credit for military service, and partner with employers to offer on-the-job training that counts toward a degree or a certificate.

We must broaden options because the students we serve today are far more diverse than those we served a quarter-century ago. A quarter of our UNC System students are 25 or older. Many have kids and are returning to get a degree, or mid-way through a career and needing extra skills or credentials to advance.
Any vision that’s overly focused on that 18-year-old coming straight from high school won’t cut it anymore.

We have to take a hard look at our state’s full educational continuum, and that’s why we’ve formed the myFutureNC Commission.

The commission will set a goal for how many North Carolinians need some form of education beyond high school and establish recommendations for how to get there.

We are one of just five states without a statewide education goal. I’m glad this state is an outlier in discussions of educational affordability and quality. But being one of the few states without an attainment goal- that’s not the kind of outlier we want to be.

To achieve our new goal, this System must step up and work better with our K-12 and community college partners.

We must better prepare K-12 teachers so students graduate high school ready for the next step. For me, improving teacher preparation is a personal priority, and it’s the focus of a recent report we released, outlining how we can do better.

Our colleges of education at Western, Appalachian, and Asheville are all behind this effort and next week I’ll be in Raleigh talking with legislators about our work moving forward.

Our partnerships with K-12 schools themselves are also crucial. Partnerships like UNCA’s dual enrollment agreement with the Asheville City schools, and the great progress at App State and Western Carolina to create new lab schools.

The Catamount School in Jackson County and Appalachian State’s Academy at Middle Fork are helping fulfill the Legislature’s vision for centers of innovation, research, and teaching excellence.

We must also improve our partnerships with community colleges.

Creating more seamless, better integrated relationships between universities and community colleges increases retention rates, drive completion, and, most importantly, gets more students who want a four-year degree graduated with the skills they need and less debt.

Because affordability underscores our entire discussion of economic mobility. Opportunity is meaningless if you can’t afford it.

Happily, North Carolina remains a national leader on college costs, and through the leadership of the General Assembly, the UNC Board of Governors, and our institution’s trustees and chancellors, we’ve put a lid on tuition.

We’re holding tuition to no more than the pace of income growth, freezing it for students who remain enrolled and on-track, and thanks to a bold investment from the General Assembly, NC Promise has dropped tuition to just $500 per semester at three institutions including Western Carolina University.
NC Promise is a remarkable opportunity. It’s a market-driven approach to ensuring college access, it’s North Carolina’s bold opening salvo to the current debate on college affordability, and I am excited to see the growth and opportunity it unleashes.

The extraordinary, $51 million commitment by the legislature means students from every household can see a top-notch education as within their financial grasp.

Our next step, for all our institutions, is focusing on getting students across the finish line with smart student success initiatives and simpler, fairer approaches to financial aid.

That means taking good ideas piloted at our institutions and scaling them across the System. Like the early intervention efforts at Appalachian State that provide mentoring and faculty support to students at risk of falling behind.

Or like the “First to Finish” summer grant funding at UNC Asheville, which helps students get a few extra credits during the summer to stay on-track. We’re excited to work with the Legislature to expand this approach through the System via our Accelerate through Summer Grant program.

Our nation’s most important pathway to opportunity must become less of a high-stakes gamble for our most vulnerable students, and we must double down on the common-sense approaches that we know works.

**Accountability**

Success, across all those areas, depends on whether we hold ourselves accountable for actually doing the hard work in the trenches.

Which is why our second key issue is accountability.

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 both 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.

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

Done right, better data and higher standards are tools for greater flexibility, for better decision-making, and timely evaluation at the institutional level.

Accountability doesn’t hinder talented leaders — it gives them the ability to pursue goals effectively.

That’s what our strategic plan is all about, and why it won unanimous support from the UNC Board of Governors.
I’ve signed 17 customized performance agreements with each chancellor in the UNC System, all of them embracing measurable outcomes as a route to excellence.

Our chancellors have signed performance agreements outlining ambitious goals, including 20 and 30 percent increases in critical workforce credentials in fields like teaching, healthcare, and STEM.

And big increases in rural and low-income enrollments and completions, including a 30 percent increase in low-income completions at Western Carolina, a 20 percent increase in rural completions at UNC Asheville, and a 50% reduction in the achievement gap for low-income students at App State.

All by 2022.

Our progress will be on display for all to see in newly launched data dashboards showing how each institution, and the System as a whole, does on a yearly basis.

But to truly understand our own operation, evaluate our programs, and drive better decision making, we must reform and repair some of the clunky data systems we currently use.

That’s why data modernization is our top priority for May’s legislative short session.

With a better understanding of our own enterprise, we can move toward a funding model that better serves our priorities and puts our money where our mouths are.

If we care about graduation rates, achievement gaps, and creating a 21st century workforce, our resources must match our rhetoric and our goals.

Nationally, we’re seeing a deeply discouraging retreat on shared standards and accountability.

But I’m proud that North Carolina is charting a different course, pulling back the curtain and letting measurable results guide our actions and tell our story.

**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. It’s the reason this University exists — the bedrock of everything we do.

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 help set the tone for our graduates and the world beyond.

And that’s an enormous responsibility.
We live in a world of instant headlines about campus protests and disinvited speakers. A thoughtless remark from a student, a professor, or a university administrator can ricochet across the country, sending everyone to their assigned corners to denounce or defend.

What we do every day as educators and public institutions matters. We have to 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.

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.

Anyone who says that college students have lost their heads or their desire to be good citizens just isn’t paying attention.

But I promise you this — our students are paying attention to us. They’re watching how we lead and govern, how we engage in public debate, 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

This University is full of people who are here to make a difference. The folks working every day in our labs and classrooms, our police departments and maintenance crews, and our hospitals and health clinics are here because they want to be a force for good in this state and region.

And they are — all across this state, in all 100 of North Carolina’s counties.

Our job as a System is to enable their good work.

To provide economic mobility for all North Carolinians, hold ourselves accountable to higher expectations, and take ownership of our role advancing public discourse, debate, and the public good.

UNC System President Friday used to issue a powerful challenge to students.

“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 I know I’ll be standing before you again in a few years to report an even stronger, more effective University of North Carolina System.